WESTERN STORY

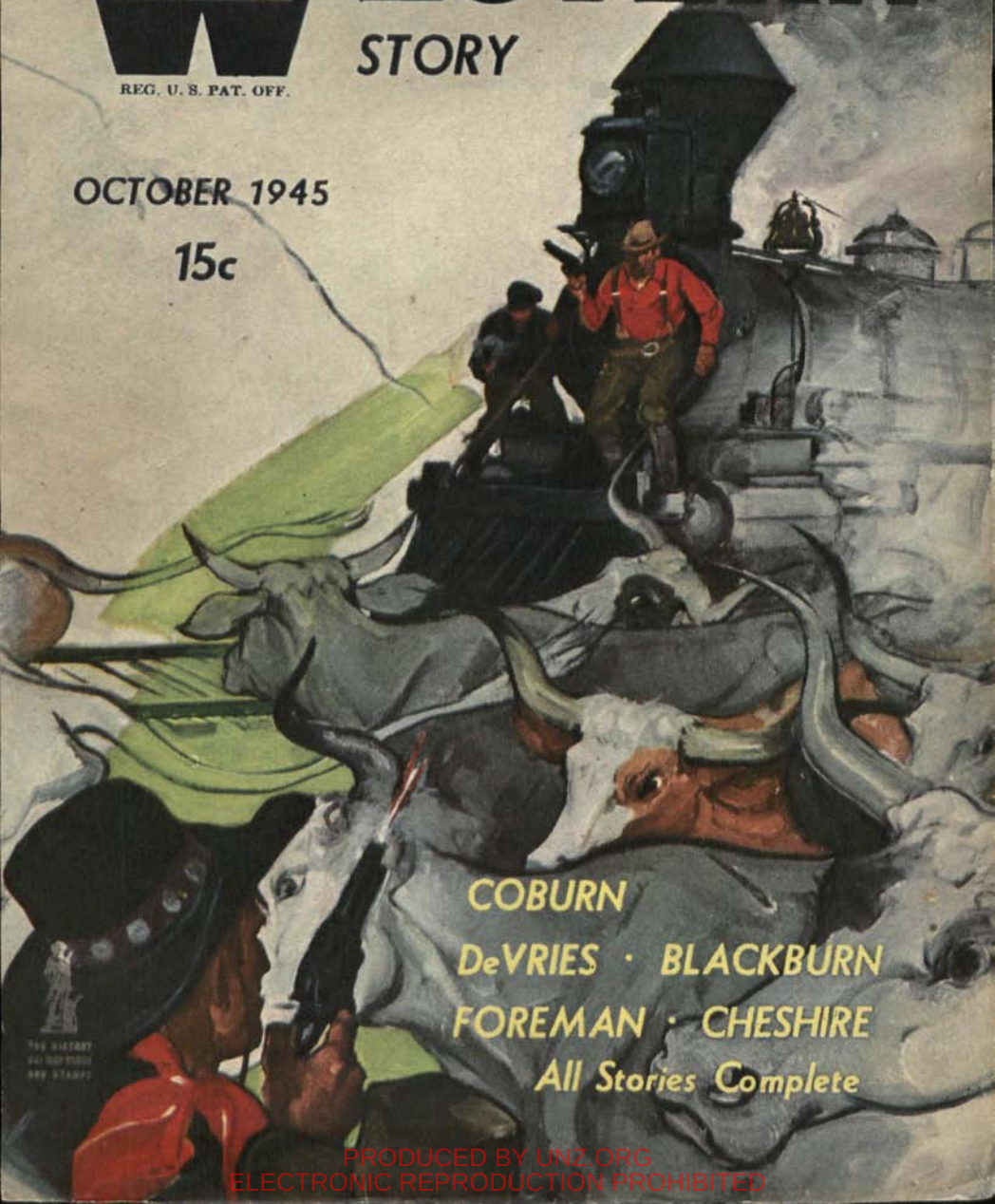
STREET AND SMITH'S

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

OCT. 1945

OCTOBER 1945

15c



COBURN

DeVRIES · BLACKBURN

FOREMAN · CHESHIRE

All Stories Complete

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

交友易難

An Old Chinese Adage:

"It takes a year to make a friend

But you can lose one in an hour!" *

* When you're guilty of halitosis (unpleasant breath)—and anyone can offend some time or another—your friends may shy away from you. Why take a chance like this when Listerine Antiseptic offers such a delightful and easy precaution? Simply rinse the mouth with it morning and night, and before any date where you want to be at your best.

While sometimes systemic, most cases of halitosis are due, say some authorities, to the fermentation of tiny food particles on mouth surfaces. Listerine Antiseptic quickly halts such fermentation and overcomes the odors it causes.

LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC

for oral hygiene

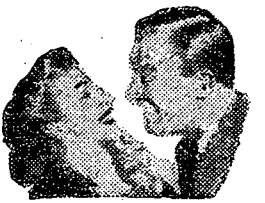
LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., *St. Louis, Mo.*

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Why one husband kissed his wife four times!

"Here's a kiss for the money you're saving...while it's coming in faster through the the war years. I know in my bones jobs like mine may not last forever. Who can tell what's going to happen day-after-tomorrow? Thank God you've got sense enough to see that today's the time to get a little money tucked away.

"Here's a kiss for the War Bonds you're making me hold on to! I'd never do it without you, honey; it's too easy to find reasons for cashing 'em in—but when it comes time to put the children through school or pay for an emergency operation, we'll be thankful.



"Here's a kiss for the insurance you talked me into buying. I've felt a lot easier ever since I've known our future is protected—you and the kids would be safe if anything happened to me—you and I won't have to spend our old age living on someone's charity. And every cent we put in insurance or War Bonds or other savings helps keep prices down.

and

Here's a kiss for being *you*—a woman with brains enough in your pretty head to make sure we don't buy a single thing we *don't* need in times like these—because you know a crazy wave of spending in wartime would march America straight into inflation. Baby, I sure knew how to pick 'em the day I married you!

A United States War message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

ONE PERSON CAN START IT!

You give inflation a boost

—when you buy anything you can do without

—when you buy above ceiling or without giving up stamps (Black Market)

—when you ask more money for your services or the goods you sell.

Save your money. Buy and hold all the War Bonds you can afford—to pay for the war and protect your own future. Keep up your insurance.

HELP US KEEP PRICES DOWN

WS—1N

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

OCTOBER, 1945 VOL. CCXIII, NO. 6

NOVEL

TEXAS RANGER'S LONG REACH, *by Walt Coburn* 6

NOVELETTES

SETTLER OF THE SALOBRAL, *by L. L. Foreman* 42

A RIDE TO MAKE, *by Tom W. Blackburn* . . . 62

HELLION'S HARVEST, *by Giff Cheshire* 84

SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES

BOUNTY BUSCADERO, *by S. Omar Barker* . . 32

WINTER RIDIN', *by Joe Rodriguez* 55

PAYOFF FOR A PILGRIM, *by M. L. DeVries* . 56

RANGE SAVVY, *by Gene King* 83

PUZZLE 101

A GHOST IS BURIED, *by Wayne D. Overholser* . 102

WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE, *by John North* 112

GUNS AND GUNNERS, *by Captain Philip B. Sharpe* 114

MINES AND MINING, *by John A. Thompson* . . 116

DEATH TRESPASS, *by Ray Palmer Tracy* . . 118

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

Editor
JOHN BURR

The editorial contents of this magazine have not been published before, are protected by copyright and cannot be reprinted without the publisher's permission. All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

Publication issued monthly by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Allen L. Grammer, President; Gerald H. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President and Secretary. Copyright 1945, in U. S. A. and Great Britain by Street & Smith Publications, Inc. Re-entered as Second-class Matter, February 3, 1944, at the Post Office at New York, under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions in U. S. A. $1.50 per year; to Countries in Pan American Union, $1.75 per year; elsewhere, $2.25 per year. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Any material submitted must include return postage.

Printed in the U. S. A. 15c per Copy

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Autumn Chills

They may be in the air, or they may not—but you **will** find chills—thrills—and good reading in the new Street & Smith DETECTIVE STORY ANNUAL!

144 pages of the best fiction published in DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE. Such headliners as Bruno Fischer, with THE CASE OF THE SLEEPING DOLL . . . Carroll John Daly, with BODY, BODY, WHO'S GOT THE BODY . . . Roger Torrey, with DEATH DOES THE JITTER-BUG . . . novelettes, short stories—all guaranteed entertainment.

DETECTIVE STORY ANNUAL is on sale now . . . so go to your newsstand and get the best 25c value on the stands!

DETECTIVE STORY ANNUAL

25c A COPY (30c IN CANADA) AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

If your dealer cannot supply you, fill out the coupon below.

STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC.
122 E. 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

Enclosed is 25c (30c in Canada) for the new DETECTIVE STORY ANNUAL.

Name .....

Address ..... Zone No. .....

City ..... State .....

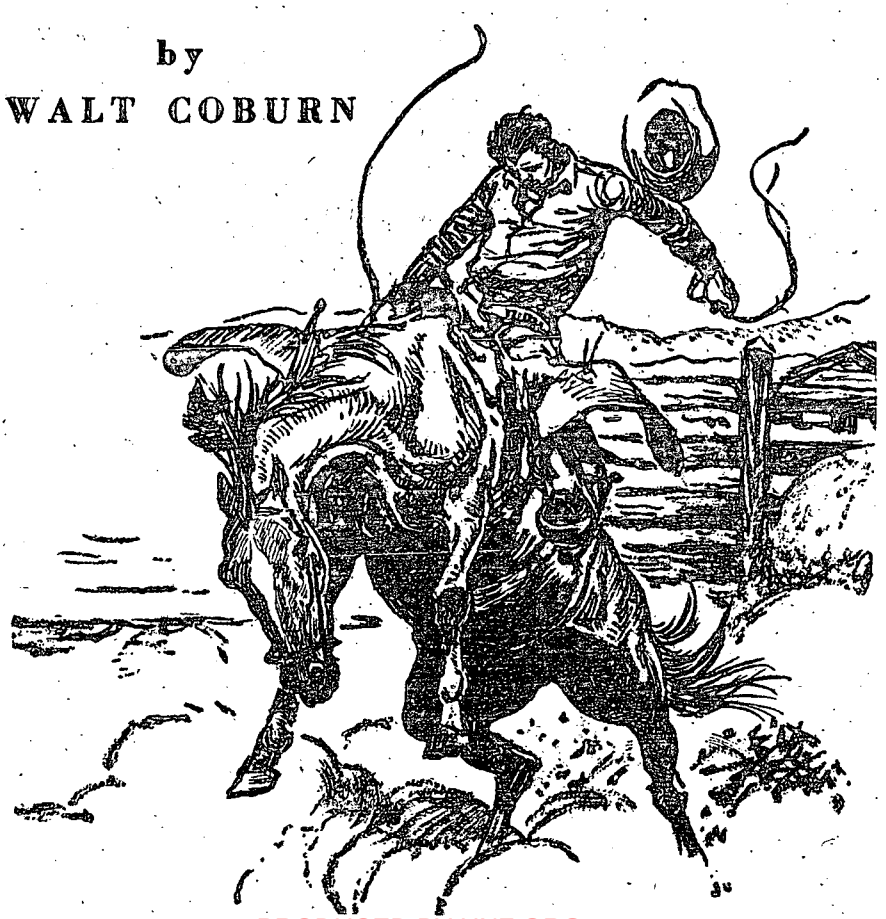
PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Built with blood money and the snarling bullets of hired killers, the Mashed Q was forbidden territory for strangers but its sinister kingpin wasn't beyond that

TEXAS RANGER'S LONG REACH

by

WALT COBURN



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I

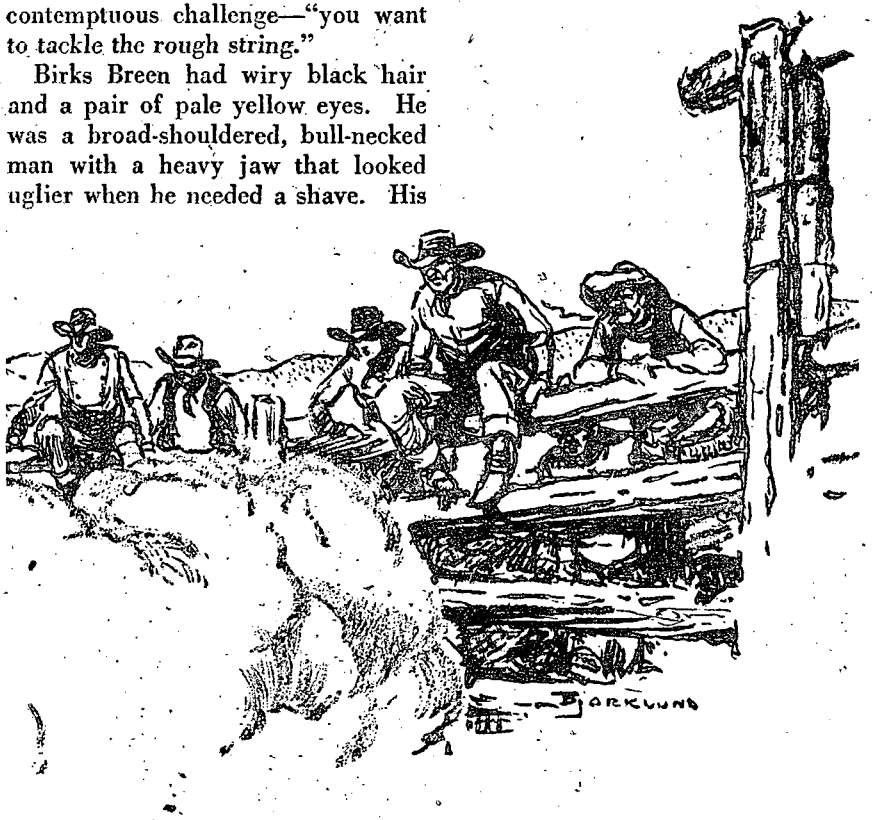
WHEN Ike Roper tackled Birks Breen for a job, the big Mashed Q ramrod told him that the outfit was full-handed.

"Unless"—Breen looked down from his big six-foot-three height, and his flat-lipped grin twisted in a contemptuous challenge—"you want to tackle the rough string."

Birks Breen had wiry black hair and a pair of pale yellow eyes. He was a broad-shouldered, bull-necked man with a heavy jaw that looked uglier when he needed a shave. His enemies claimed he had a yellow streak down his back but none of them had ever seemed to be able to uncover it.

Ike Roper was only medium height. But he had a husky build and a quick way of moving and he looked as though he could handle himself almost anywhere. There was no fear in his puckered blue eyes and the wide mouth under his blunt nose spread in a faint answering grin.

"I'm no bronc rider," he told the big Mashed Q Ranch foreman and wagon boss quietly, "but a man with empty pockets can't be choosey. You done hired a hand."



Birks Breen pointed out a big brown gelding and told him to dab his line on him.

"Screw that hull of yourn down on the Bogus Brown and set the hair on

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

'im, and the rest of your rough string will feel like the ol' rockin' chair."

Breen told Ike Roper he'd better ride the Bogus Brown in the bronc corral.

"We ain't got time to chase the Bogus Brown acrost the flats to git you back your saddle, towhead."

Most of these big cow outfits were alike. When a stranger on a strange range hires out to ride the rough string, he draws a warthog.

Birks Breen and a few of his bootlickers climbed the corral to watch the show and the ramrod told young Owen Quentin to close the gate that joined the small round bronc corral to the big corral that was a hundred feet across.

Owen was about twenty—tall and slim with gray-blue eyes and hair the color of new rope. There was nothing you could call weak about his jaw line or the set of his mouth, and his eyes had a frank boyish look. But Birks Breen ordered him around the way he'd call a sheep dog to heel and he gave young Owen Quentin all the dirty jobs to do. And that was despite the fact that young Owen was Burt Quentin's only son.

For all his quiet obedience that amounted to meekness, young Owen Quentin was the best all-around cowhand who drew Mashed Q wages.

Swinging the big pole gate shut, Owen climbed the corral. It was as though he was closing Ike Roper in a trap with the man-killing Bogus Brown, because if Birks Breen wasn't lying, the big brown outlaw had killed a couple of bronc riders and crippled a few more.

The Bogus Brown wasn't hard to saddle, and he let Ike Roper get his right stirrup before he untracked himself. Then Ike could feel all that twelve hundred pounds of hard muscle and big bone bunch and tighten. The next second he was trying to stay in the saddle without grabbing for the horn. The air was filled with dust and out of that swirling yellow dust cloud sounded the bronc's raucous squeal and grunt.

The corral was built for bronc riding. The big brown could not pitch more than three jumps ahead without slamming into the stout poles. But the Bogus Brown did not pitch in a straight line. He was seven years old and wise from his first saddling when he was a two-year-old. He pinwheeled and did his bucking in the middle of the corral and if there had been a twenty-foot rug spread out in the middle of the corral, the Bogus Brown would have done his pitching without getting his hoofs in the dust.

Ike Roper lasted about five jumps. Then he lost both stirrups the same jump and was thrown high and far and clear. He landed in the heavy powdery dirt at the base of one of the corral posts, dazed, shaken and dizzy. He had lost his hat the first jump and his tow-colored head was dust-powdered, sweaty.

Getting to his feet, he slapped the dust off his clothes with his hands and walked over to the Bogus Brown. The horse had quit pitching and stood stiff-legged, whistling through flared nostrils, saving his powerful strength.

Ike cut a quick look upward. He

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

saw the Mashed Q cowhands perched along the top of the pole corral like so many buzzards. Owen Quentin's lean tanned face looked a little white and tense as though he was scared for the bronc rider. There was a thin, twisted grin on Birks Breen's big square face with its wiry black stubble. But nobody broke the silence.

The Bogus Brown let Ike mount a second time. Let him get his right stirrup, get settled. Then Ike swung his rawhide quirt and the show was on again.

It lasted longer this time. Ike kept quirting, over and under and down across both withers and flanks. He quirted the pitching bronc out of its pinwheel, and man and horse crashed into the corral and caromed off and across it and slammed into the far side. The Bogus Brown pitched around against the inside of the corral and so close against the poles that it looked as though he'd tear the man's foot and stirrup off. Ike Roper's quirt loop swung from his crooked fingers like a flail and above the dull thud of big hoofs hitting the ground could be heard the spatting slap of the braided rawhide and wide twin tails of the quirt. Ike was still quirting when the Bogus Brown threw him the second time.

He landed clear again, on both feet. Then he stumbled and as he lost his balance, he grabbed the corral and he scrambled up its divided poles just in time to keep from being knocked down and tromped by the pitching bronc.

Birks Breen was chewing tobacco. He spat down into the corral, just missing Ike Roper's sweaty, dusty head.

"Climb on over and outside," sneered Breen, "if you're that bad scairt. I'll have Owen unsaddle the Bogus."

Blood trickled from Ike Roper's nose. The inside of his skull felt jarred loose. He was half blinded and his eyes were bloodshot and slitted like blue slivers of steel as he blinked through the sweat and dirt.

The big Bogus Brown had quit pitching and was trotting crabwise, the horsehair hackamore rope trailing. Sweat darkened the brown hide. The big gelding's eyes rolled until the whites showed wickedly.

Ike Roper climbed down into the corral. He was a little groggy and sweat rolled down his dirt-and-blood-smeared face as he followed doggedly until he could grab the trailing hackamore rope. His hands fumbled as he yanked the bronc to a halt and eased his way up to the big outlaw's head, to the saddlehorn, to twist the left stirrup around and ease slowly, none too steadily, back into the saddle.

Once again Ike Roper settled into his saddle. Summoning all the guts and strength he had left, he gripped the horn, shoved both feet into the stirrups and screwed himself down. Then he let go the saddlehorn and hung both spurs in the big brown bronc's shoulders. He was using everything he had left in his jarred, shaken, husky body.

The Bogus Brown met the man's spurred challenge. His grunting,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bawling squeal voiced it. And this was the final and supreme test for mastery. Big hoofs thudded. Dust boiled up in billowing yellow clouds and in the middle of it the big Bogus Brown was bucking. But it looked as though the outlaw was going to be ridden for the first time by the stranger called Ike Roper.

"Open the gate, Owen!" barked Birks Breen. "Wide open! Git a move on!"

For the fraction of a minute young Owen Quentin hesitated. But the long years of meek habit were too hard to break. He swung the pole gate open.

The big Bogus Brown saw the open gate, the big hundred-foot corral beyond. Space enough there to really pitch. Twisting, bawling, high and crooked, the Bogus bucked through the open gateway and into the big corral beyond. But Ike Roper was still riding, blood trickling from his nose and from behind his bared, clenched teeth and from both dust-filled ears. Spurring, the rawhide quirt flailing. His blue eyes were glazed and his head bobbed with each jump, but he hung and rattled. And the big brown outlaw was using the last of his tricks.

The yellow dust boiled up. Those who watched saw the big Bogus Brown somersault and pile up on his head in the thick corral dirt. Four legs, four shod hoofs went up in the air. And a high, thin, dry-throated cry was torn from Owen Quentin.

Then the big Bogus Brown scrambled to its four legs and trotted off a few steps. Turning, he stood there, legs far apart and braced, the sweat dripping from his wet, dirt-smeared hide, head lowered, spent and quivering.

But Ike Roper did not move. He lay in a sprawled heap with his eyes closed and the blood trickling from his nose and mouth and ears into the thick powdery yellow dirt of the big corral.

"Looks dead, don't he?" said Birks Breen. He spat tobacco juice into the dirt below. But he did not move. None of the others moved, either. They dared not until the big ramrod told them what to do.

II

It was then that Old Man Burt Quentin rode up from his big log house. The corrals were on a wide flat bench a hundred yards up the slope from the log ranch buildings.

Though they called Burt Quentin the "Old Man," he was not actually so old. Sixty, at the outside. But his thick hair and drooping mustache were white. He was tall, rawboned and gaunt-faced and his leathery skin was deeply lined around the corners of his mouth and eyes and the lines etched so deeply they might have been made by a sharp knife to give his features a mask of bitter ruthlessness. His nose was hawk-beaked and a pair of hard gray-green eyes glittered under craggy, ragged brows. Burt Quentin kept a barrel of whiskey in his bedroom. Every morning he filled a half gallon jug from the barrel. And he seldom asked anybody to drink with him. But he never got drunk, as you figure a drunken man. Some said that he

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was crazy, that his ruthless cruelty, his brutal ways, his brooding sullenness, were signs of his insanity.

He rode up along the outside of the small corral. Standing in his long stirrups, he stared past Birks Breen at the motionless, dust-powdered bronc rider.

"Dead?" His flat-toned voice matched his bleak eyes.

"Looks thataway," said the big Mashed Q ramrod.

"Who is he?"

"Calls himself Ike Roper."

"Let Owen go through his pockets. Git your horse and come on down to the house." Old Man Burt Quentin reined his big black gelding and rode away at the shuffling running walk that had brought him up the slant.

"Roll 'im, Owen." Birks Breen swung one big leg to straddle the corral. "If he's dead, roll 'is carcass in a meat tarp. You kin turn the Bogus Brown back into the remuda . . . All right, you fellers. The rail birdin's over. Rattle your hocks. Git at your chores. Owen'll handle this."

Birks Breen twisted his head around as another rider came up. He grinned down at the girl on the chunky roan cow horse.

There was nothing meek or beaten about Owen Quentin's sister. Her name was Geraldine but nobody called her that. She was called Gerry and she signed her name Gerry Quentin. Her thick curly hair, a dark mahogany red, was cut off to shoulder length for convenience. Her eyes were slate gray under level black brows. She dressed like a cowpuncher and sat her horse like one and her saddlehorn was ropemarked. But when Gerry Quentin wore a dress, she was almighty feminine, and in an evening frock she was something to make a man catch his breath. Her voice had a soft husky tone.

"Looks like you've had yourself another Roman holiday, Birks. Who is it this time?"

"That stranger who rode up last evenin' hired out to ride the rough string. The Bogus Brown kind o' drug it out o' him."

"You're awful big, aren't you, Birks? And awful tough . . . And awful, awful yellow . . . The Old Man called you. Don't keep him waiting."

Gerry Quentin rode around to the far gate of the big corral, opened it without quitting her saddle, and rode in. She dismounted and squatted on her spurred boot heels, lifting Ike Roper's head and wiping the blood and dirt from his color-drained face.

"Don't just stand there like you're goin' to be sick, Owen." Her voice was sharp-edged now. "Get a pail of fresh water and a clean towel."

"Is . . . is he dead, Gerry?"

"Not yet."

"He rode the Bogus Brown."

"So I see. Get that water, Owen. And a bottle of that booze you got hid out. And don't let Birks Breen stop you, goin' or comin' back."

It was about half an hour later when Ike Roper felt cold water on his head and face and the taste of raw whiskey in his mouth and got

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his eyes open. Blinking a little, he forced a flat grin.

"I'd swear," he said in a croaking whisper, "I was seein' a lady."

"Lady?" Gerry Quentin shook her mop of dark red curls. "I'm no lady, mister. I'm Gerry Quentin." Her red mouth smiled.

"Geraldine Quentin?"

"Who told you there was a Geraldine Quentin?" She still smiled but her eyes had suddenly changed expression. She stared down at him with an intense, almost frightened darkness that made her slate-gray eyes seem almost black.

"If that's hard likker you're feedin' me, lady, don't make me swallow no more. I don't want to be drunk."

"It won't make you drunk. You need a drink. Take it." She held the neck of the bottle against his teeth and poured and he had to swallow or choke.

Then Ike twisted his head aside and some of the whiskey spilled. Gerry wiped it off his lower jaw and helped him sit up. And then Ike Roper got onto his hands and knees and stood up slowly. He was shaken and lame and bruised and dizzy, but there were no bones broken. He managed a lopsided grin.

"It pays to be tough," he said.

"Who told you there was a Geraldine Quentin?" she asked stubbornly.

Ike Roper shook his head. He saw Owen standing there behind his sister and his grin widened a little.

"Owen is meek and they kick him around like a mongrel," said his sister, "but he can keep his mouth shut. Who said there was a Geraldine Quentin?"

"Owen," said Ike Roper, "is all right. I sized him up last night. And you're Gerry Quentin. Just let it ride, thataway . . . Speakin' of ridin', am I fired or do I git the Mashed Q rough string?"

"Haven't you had enough of Birks Breen's cold-blooded punishment?" asked the girl.

Ike Roper shook his head. "No."

"Owen and I looked you over. There's no law badge pinned to your undershirt."

"No."

"No man needs forty a month bad enough," said Gerry Quentin, "to take more of this. If you're not a range detective sent here to spy on Burt Quentin, then just what's the game?"

"Mebby I'm just kind o' mule-brained."

"Birks Breen won't believe that. Neither will Old Man Burt Quentin. In case you don't know or haven't got it figured out by this time, the Mashed Q is a tough outfit and Burt Quentin and Birks Breen don't like strangers."

"And I'd be yellow-bellied," grinned Ike Roper, "if I quit now."

"You'll be a dead duck," Gerry Quentin said flatly, "if you don't ride away from it. Right now."

"A nice lady like you shouldn't make threats."

"I'm no lady. I'm Gerry Quentin. That's more than a threat. It's a warning. Quit being so tough. Saddle your private, mister. Pull out before they kill you. I don't want your blood on my hands, Ike Roper."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'll fetch your horse, mister." Owen spoke up with meek eagerness. "Gerry's right. It'll be murder. Again."

Ike Roper looked at them. The girl. Her brother. Studying them narrowly. It would be almighty easy for a man to make a fool of himself over a girl like that. And in spite of the young cowpuncher's quiet meekness Ike liked Owen Quentin. He'd be willing to gamble that one of these times Owen would fight his way out of that hang-dog shell.

"I rode that Bogus Brown into the dust," he said slowly. "That earned me the Mashed Q rough string. I'm claimin' it. Regardless."

III

Some secret fear held Old Man Burt Quentin trapped here at the headquarters ranch of his immense Mashed Q outfit. That fear made him a sort of prisoner within his own boundaries so that he never rode alone. It was always Birks Breen and nobody else who accompanied the Old Man whenever he rode away from the home ranch. And before dark the blinds were pulled and heavy wooden shutters were closed and locked and the doors barred.

The Old Man's bedroom, office and den were shut off from the rest of the rambling one-storied log house. The inside walls were log and the door that separated Burt Quentin's quarters from the other part of the house was made of hardwood and three inches thick. It and the outer door to the Old Man's private quarters were fitted with heavy bolts. The gun rack in his den was a small arsenal. And he had had gun slots made in the walls and both doors so that he could, without being seen, size up anybody who rapped on either door at the window shutters.

There was a lot of dark mystery shrouding Old Man Burt Quentin's back trail. Settlers who had lived here in this section of Montana for the past twenty years remembered his coming. There had been two prairie-schooner covered wagons, each drawn by four stout Missouri mules. A frail-looking white woman with skin like ivory and a mass of copper-colored hair drove one team, her three small children on the wide seat beside her. The oldest boy was about six and a girl no more than three or four held a baby boy. That was the lead wagon.

Behind it rolled the second prairie schooner. The lines of the four stout mules were expertly handled by a young woman who looked to be part Mexican and part Indian. About thirty years old, she had pale golden skin, and her hair, parted in the middle and plaited in a pair of heavy braids, was straight and blue-black as a crow's wing. There was a sullen droop to her full-lipped mouth and her opaque black eyes watched the white woman and her three children with a smoldering hatred she took no pains to conceal. Unlike most of her mixed breed, she was not given to fleshiness but was well proportioned and lithe and strong.

A boy about twelve or fourteen helped Burt Quentin drive the cavvy of loose saddle horses. There were

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

over a hundred head of horses in the remuda. Now and then the boy would ride up alongside the second wagon. He had thick wiry black hair that needed cutting and his eyes were pale yellow in color. Strongly made, he sat a horse well and he packed a saddle gun and six-shooter. And when he rode up alongside the wagon the young breed woman's dark eyes would soften and her sullen red lips would lift in a quick smile. The boy would show his teeth in a grin and then he would ride off again, proud, with a sort of show-off swagger. And no word was spoken between the young breed woman called Tana and her son Birks.

That was the way the tall, hawk-beaked, hard-eyed Burt Quentin came to Cottonwood Valley in Montana. He was graying, even twenty years ago. And there was a stern, forbidding mask to his face and a bleak look in his gray-green eyes when anybody rode up. An unfriendly man who made it plain from the beginning that he wanted nothing to do with neighboring ranchers, he let it be known that the white woman was his wife and those were his three youngsters. The breed woman was his wife's companion. Her name was Tana Breen and the boy Birks was her son, and the boy's father was dead. Burt Quentin volunteered that much information and no more. He had cash money enough to buy out the other ranchers in Cottonwood Valley.

"Put a fair price on your outfit." Burt Quentin would ride up alone with the money in his saddle pockets and his guns handy to protect his money and his hide. "I'll lay the money on the barrelhead. It'll pay you to sell out now."

It could have been a quiet threat and, after all, land was free for the taking. The ranchers let the grim-lipped, hard-eyed Quentin pay them for the trouble of moving across the skyline. And that was how Burt Quentin got Cottonwood Valley.

The cattle came a few weeks later, in time to get acclimated. It was a big trail drive of Texas longhorns in the Mashed Q iron and road iron. The trail boss and every cowhand in the outfit were Mexicans. They scattered the gaunt longhorns along Cottonwood Creek, turned their remuda over to Quentin, were paid off in cash money, and left. They were seen no more.

Burt Quentin hired a big crew of men to build his log house and a bunkhouse, a big barn and cattle sheds and pole corrals. When they were done, Quentin paid them off. Before the first snowfall Burt Quentin was well-settled, ready for the long Montana winter. He owned all of Cottonwood Valley and he let it be known that strangers were not welcome.

Certainly there was no fear in Quentin then. He rode alone, his saddle pockets stuffed with gold and sheaves of banknotes. A ruthless, dangerous man, he always carried a pair of six-shooters and a saddle carbine. Nobody ever heard Burt Quentin laugh. There was a look in his bleak eyes that kept men at a distance. That was perhaps the reason why he never had to pull a gun.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Burt Quentin was fair and square in his business deals. He had bought out the other ranchers at their own figures, paid them in cash and told them they had twenty-four hours to move out of the valley. He never intimated what would happen to them if they lingered. None of them had the temerity to be that curious.

Yet Burt Quentin was a hated man. He had not a single friend. He had made it plain from the start that he wanted no man's hand in friendship. He wanted to be let alone. Men let him alone—and they hated him. Hated him without any special reason and rode wide around his Cottonwood Valley.

One by one, Burt Quentin hired his cowhands. They came from nowhere. And for the most part they were a hard-eyed crew. They packed six-shooters. On the roundup there were saddle carbines stowed in their bedrolls. In town they herded together. They got drunk and painted the town and rode out to the roundup camp and back to work. None of them was talkative. The rumor spread that Burt Quentin recruited his cowpunchers from as far south along the Outlaw Trail as Robbers' Roost in Utah. They had orders to mind their own Mashed Q business and keep their mouths shut.

Nobody knew when or how Burt Quentin's beautiful delicate-looking red-haired wife died. It was sometime between the early snowfall that first winter and late spring when the warm Chinook wind cut the deep drifts. When the green grass came it grew on her grave. And that was when Burt Quentin had the heavy shutters made for his windows and bolts put on his doors. And from then on Burt Quentin watched the skyline for strangers.

Fear of some kind, dark, hidden, mysterious, fenced Burt Quentin in. But he was not a cowardly man. That secret fear made him all the more dangerous.

The young breed woman called Tana cared for the three motherless children, but the care she gave them had nothing of their real mother's gentleness. She had a long thin whip she made of twisted rawhide. Her opaque black eyes would shine and her red lips would part in a queer smile when she used the rawhide whip. But the rawhide never touched her son Birks.

The older boy was called Glen. Red-headed, freckled and hot-tempered, he was a born rebel, headlong as a sorrel colt. He was always into trouble that gave Tana an excuse to wield the rawhide whip.

The girl Gerry was another little rebel in camp. But she had a better grip on her tongue and she devoted her time to the protection of her baby brother, Owen.

"Glen has to protect his own hide," little Gerry told Tana. "And I'll take my whippin's. But if ever you lay that rawhide whip on my baby brother, I'll kill you, Tana. You remember that!"

IV

One day Burt Quentin and Tana rode into the little cow town of Cottonwood. They reined up in front

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the Justice of the Peace's office and dismounted. Tana was beautiful to look at in her leather divided skirt and boots and a buckskin blouse. She and Burt Quentin made a handsome couple. They told the judge they wanted to be married.

The judge thought Burt Quentin already had one wife and said so.

"She died last winter." Burt Quentin's voice had been flat-toned. His bleak eyes forbade further questioning. "Git on with this marriage, judge."

Burt Quentin and his bride rode out of town as unobtrusively as they had ridden in. Neither of them looked to right or left as they rode along the wide dusty street between the rows of buildings that were for the most part saloons.

"Stay out of Cottonwood Valley," they would tell a stranger. "Stay off the Mashed Q range," they would warn away drifting grubline-riding cowpunchers who wanted work. And after twenty years it had become a sort of unwritten law in that part of Montana.

Outsiders knew little or nothing about what went on at the Mashed Q headquarters ranch. Burt Quentin was his own law. His foster son, Birks Breen, helped enforce Quentin's laws.

Five years ago the news trickled out that Glen Quentin was dead. Nobody knew the facts surrounding his death. There were all kinds of wild rumors. You could take your choice. But the one story that survived the lesser tales of his death was this: It was Birks Breen and no one else who had shot and killed Glen Quentin.

For twenty years it had been an unwritten law: Stay off the Mashed Q range. Ride wide around Cottonwood Valley and the Mashed Q headquarters ranch.

That had not stopped the stranger who called himself Ike Roper. He rode into Cottonwood Valley and reined up at the home ranch one evening at sundown under the cold, hostile eyes of a dozen Mashed Q cowhands.

The only pair of eyes that was at all friendly belonged to the slim sandy-haired young cowhand Owen Quentin. Owen looked scared and too cowed to make a welcoming gesture.

Then big Birks Breen had swaggered out of the big log barn and stood on widespread legs, his thumbs hooked in a sagging cartridge belt.

"I got a mind," Breen had said, "to set the dogs on 'im."

There were fifteen or twenty big savage-looking wolfhounds sniffing the stranger's horse and him. They looked big enough and ugly enough to drag a man out of his saddle.

Ike Roper had eyed the hounds, then looked straight into the big ramrod's pale-yellow eyes.

"They're Gerry's hounds," Owen had spoken up quietly. "You know they won't mind you, Birks. You don't dare lay a hand on a one of 'em or the pack would tear you apart . . . Come here, Wolfer. Here, fellers . . ."

The big hounds gathered around Owen. He rubbed their ragged ears and battle-scarred heads.

Birks Breen's dark skin flushed a dull red. "Some strychnine baits is

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what them dawgs'll git one of these times."

Owen just smiled. The smile went deep. Birks Breen scowled blackly and turned to the stranger.

"Who the hell are you, hombre? What fetched you here?"

"I hoped," Ike Roper said quietly, "to hire out here."

It was then that Birks Breen told him the Mashed Q was full-handed. But with a meaning look at his hard-looking cowhands, he had given Ike Roper a chance to tackle the rough string.

Now Ike had ridden the Bogus Brown. The big, bucked-out outlaw bronc still stood there, the sweat drying on his dirt-grimed brown hide. Ike Roper walked over to where the horse stood and he talked to him in a low, barely audible tone. While Gerry and Owen watched, he rubbed the big bronc's itchy ears and led him around a little. Then he mounted slowly and eased the Bogus Brown out of his tracks. He rode around the big corral slowly, then eased to a trot. In a few moments he reined up.

"I wouldn't be surprised," he said, "but what I could make a cow horse out o' the Bogus Brown."

"Then you won't pull out?" Gerry asked him.

Ike Roper shook his head. Gerry got on her roan horse and Owen mounted his and the three of them rode down the slope.

Birks Breen's saddle horse and Old Man Burt Quentin's big black stood at the hitchrack in front of the big log Mashed Q ranchhouse.

A door opened. Birks Breen stood in the doorway, a big glass of whiskey in his hand, eying them as they rode past. Then he called out in a harsh, rasping voice the way he'd call a dog.

"Come here, Owen."

Owen's lean tanned face flushed. He looked at his sister. Gerry smiled stiffly, her eyes as dark gray as a stormy sky.

"I'd better, Gerry," said Owen and he reined up.

"Then go ahead." Her tone was lifeless.

"You, too, Gerry!" grinned Birks Breen. "The Old Man wants to talk to you."

The girl pulled her horse to a halt. "Tell the Old Man," she called out in her husky voice, "that I'll talk to him when I get around to it. And don't call me like you owned me, Birks."

Then she rode on. As their stirrups touched, Gerry Quentin gave Ike Roper a twisted smile.

Ike was grinning. "You don't seem to be much scared of the big ramrod."

"Birks Breen is a yellow mongrel cur. No, I'm not scared of him. Or of the Old Man. Who sent you here, mister? I've got to know. You can trust me. Who called me Geraldine?"

Ike Roper's puckered blue eyes studied her. His head throbbed with pain and his brains seemed thick. The whiskey had melted the cold knot inside him so he took a chance.

"A man I met in prison down in Texas. A white-haired man with eyes the same dark smoky-gray color

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as yours. Your father calls you Geraldine. He didn't exactly send me but he'd be almighty proud to know I'm here."

Gerry Quentin was biting her lower lip. Her eyes misted. She had to swallow a hard lump before she could speak and then her voice was a husky whisper.

"Tell me about my father. What he looks like. All about him. The Old Man told me my father was dead, but I knew he lied. I never lost hope. My mother died of a broken heart but it was murder. They used a gun to kill my older brother Glen and they'd kill Owen if he had the guts to fight 'em. But they don't dare murder me . . . What's your name?"

"Roper. Ike Roper."

"Listen, Ike. We'll saddle you a fresh horse. Ride off where they can't watch and listen. What Owen doesn't know, they can't bulldoze out of him. This is between you and me. If you want to play your string out it'll be dangerous, with the odds stacked against you. But if we win, you win any part of the Mashed Q you ask for. All of it, if you side me straight on through. You write your own ticket, Ike Roper. Is it a deal?"

"I made my deal in the pen down in Texas with a little ol' white-haired man who was my cell pardner. A lifer. I'll side you and your kid brother. But don't mess it up, offerin' me pay."

Gerry reached out and gripped his hand. "I'm sorry, Ike. I . . . I'm all upset. It's been a long, long time since I bawled. Once when my mother died and five years ago when I buried my brother Glen. But there's tears inside me now. Dammed up and ready to bust . . . Let's ride into the hills."

At the barn Gerry spoke to the several cowpunchers who were loafing around.

"Take it easy, boys. Birks and the Old Man are hitting the jug. Keep an eye on Owen. I'll leave him the dogs. Stake Ike Roper to a horse that won't pitch the first five miles. He's bronc weary . . . Ike Roper will do to take along."

The cowpunchers no longer eyed Ike Roper with hostile coldness. One of them led out a broke horse. Another dug a partly filled quart from a manger and Ike drank with them.

"These boys are on my side, Ike," Gerry told him. "But don't trust the others."

"Birks will want to know where you rode to, Miss Gerry."

"Tell Birks," smiled Gerry Quentin, "that I'm elopin' with Ike Roper. That will please him."

They grinned and shook their heads. Ike was feeling better. Maybe it was the whiskey. But most maybe it was the soft darkness of the girl's gray eyes that warmed him and eased the aches and pains.

V

Gerry led the way past two graves. She reined to a halt and Ike pulled off his battered Stetson. Wild rose bushes almost hid the graves. On the weathered crosses Ike Roper read the names deeply carved in the weathered wood:

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"MOTHER." That was all.

And on the other cross was deeply chiseled the name "GLEN."

Gerry whispered a little prayer, then they rode on. And it was an hour or more later when they dismounted in the shade of the scrub pines at the top of a timbered butte. From where they stood they could see far down and across both sides of Cottonwood Valley. It was a cattleman's paradise.

"It's just the way your father described it to me," said Ike. "How it looked to him twenty years or more ago when he pointed one of Burt Quentin's Masked Q trail herds through here and they camped on Cottonwood. That was when your daddy ramrodded the Mashed Q in Texas. He called himself one of the pore shirt-tail kin to the rich Quentins. This is the Cottonwood Valley Jim Quentin wanted to come back to, settle down in peace and quiet with his missus and three young uns. Then the law handcuffed Jim Quentin and sent him to prison for killin' a captain of the Texas Rangers. They hang a man for killin' a Texas Ranger, but they didn't hang Jim Quentin. There was the shadow of a doubt there that they had jailed the right man. Even when Jim Quentin took a plea of guilty and never changed it."

They sat down on the ground that was carpeted with pine needles. Ike Roper went on talking as if to himself:

"Captain Jack Roper of the Texas Rangers," Ike said quietly, "was my daddy. He got bushwhacked when he was investigatin' the fence-cutter war. I was a kid then. I sat through Jim Quentin's trial, heard him plead guilty. A Ranger grabbed my gun before I could kill Jim Quentin where he sat on the witness stand. I swore I'd kill the man who had murdered my father. That still goes as she laid twenty years ago."

"My father, Jim Quentin . . ." Gerry's hand, cold as ice, gripped his as they sat side by side.

"Jim Quentin never retracted his plea of guilty," said Ike Roper. "But he's not the man who murdered Captain Jack Roper of the Texas Rangers."

He heard Gerry's choked sob and then the flood of tears came. He put his arm across her shoulders and held her like that for a long time until she had cried herself dry-eyed.

"I had myself sent to the pen under another name, Gerry," he continued. "Had 'em give me Jim Quentin for a cell pardner. And we got to know one another before the year was up. I spent a year in the Texas pen. I'd gone there with the hidden notion of killin' Jim Quentin with my hands. I came out of there his friend . . .

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We could see a patch of stars from our cell window. One big star that shone bright and three smaller stars. Jim Quentin had 'em named—for his wife and three young 'uns. He used to stand there lookin' out the cell window for hours. A little gray man with white hair and dark-gray puckered eyes. Soft-voiced, kindly. I couldn't take it no longer. I told him who I was, why I had myself sent to the pen. He said he'd known I was Jack Roper's boy Ike. He remembered seein' me at the trial.

"'Go ahead and kill me, son,' he told me, 'if you've a mind to.'" Ike Roper rolled and lit a cigarette.

"But you didn't kill my father, Ike."

"No." And Ike gave her a lop-sided smile. "You see, Gerry, I realized that the law of Texas had made a mistake. They'd sent the wrong man to prison. Jim Quentin never retracted that plea of guilty. Understand, he never once told me in so many words that he hadn't bush-whacked Captain Jack Roper of the Texas Rangers. He still stands convincted of murder. But Jim Quentin is as innocent of that crime as your kid brother Owen.

"Don't ask me why I know. I couldn't give you the answer in so many words. It's just what Jim Quentin left unsaid when he shared his prison cell with me. I got a look inside his heart."

"You're a good man, Ike," said Gerry Quentin. "It takes a good big man to have that kind of savvy." Her voice was soft and husky.

"Jim Quentin said he had made a deal with his cousin Burt. Burt was the last of the big rich Mashed Q Quentins. Burt was to look after Jim's wife and three kids while Jim was in the pen.

"'Fact is, son,' Jim Quentin told me, 'them young uns of mine will fall heir to the Mashed Q when Cousin Burt dies. It's theirn. Legal or illegal, I made such a deal with Cousin Burt Quentin. But a man shut up alone thisaway is bound to worry. There's times when I go almost locoed crazy afrettin' with worry for fear Cousin Burt won't keep his end of the deal—though he knows what'll happen to him if he breaks his word.'"

Ike's cigarette had gone out. He lit the stub. "Jim Quentin is a kindly man, Gerry. But his eyes were downright wicked when he said that . . . I shook hands with Jim Quentin and told him I was driftin' to Montana. I said I'd locate his wife and young uns and send him word how they was gettin' along. We let it go at that, Gerry. I'm here. I got a chore to tend to. If I run into hard luck, you take the train to Texas. See that ol' daddy of yours before he dies. If Old Man Burt Quentin is dead by then, you tell the warden at the prison to turn Jim Quentin loose. Take my six-shooter with you. It'll unlock the prison gates for Jim Quentin. The gun belonged to Captain Jack Roper of the Texas Rangers."

"And is now packed," Gerry Quentin was smiling, "by Captain Ike Roper of the Texas Rangers."

"No vacation," grinned Ike Roper.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ike was a little confused about Birks Breen. "He's got a strangle holt on Old Man Burt Quentin. How come, Gerry?"

"Birks is Burt Quentin's son. Tana Breen was married to Burt Quentin before he sold out in Texas and moved to Montana, to get away from the range war, he claimed. Actually to get beyond reach of the long law arm of the Texas Rangers. Burt Quentin kept his marriage a secret. Tana's mother was half Mexican and half Yaqui Indian. Her father was a renegade named Sam Breen. Sam Breen, as you no doubt know, was killed by Captain Jack Roper of the Texas Rangers. Anyhow Burt Quentin was ashamed to claim Tana Breen for his legal wife in Texas, so they kept the marriage a secret."

Ike Roper nodded. "Jim Quentin never knew. He still don't know his Cousin Burt Quentin had a wife and son. He figured you and your brothers and mother would fall heir to the Mashed Q. I kin see it all clearer now. Burt Quentin must've bin plumb in love with Tana Breen to marry a breed girl whose father had bin killed for a murderin' cattle rustler. The Mashed Q Quentins was a big and prideful outfit."

"Tana Breen," said Gerry, "for all her bad blood, had pride. And once she got Burt Quentin in love with her, she led him like a bull with a ring in his nose. Tana Breen was beautiful and cunning. She played her cards like a high-stake gambler. I hated her till the day she died. She killed my mother with her catlike cruelty. She whipped Glen and me. I still have the old scars from her rawhide whip. She had the vicious temper of a she-cougar. And her tongue was as wicked as her rawhide whip.

"Tana Breen got Captain Jack Roper of the Texas Rangers killed. The night she forced Old Man Burt Quentin into making a will that left the Mashed Q to Birks Breen Quentin, she gave the Old Man a tongue lashing. My brother Glen and I overheard it all. Every word. It was the night after the day of our mother's burial. It was a nightmare for us kids. But we had sense enough to lay low and listen. At least Glen was old enough to savvy and he kept me quiet. When I got older he repeated to me all Tana had said and what Burt Quentin had said. And we added it up and kept it our secret. The only thing we didn't know was that our real father was alive. Burt Quentin told us our father was dead, that he had died in prison. He made my mother believe that, too. Grief killed her.

"When Glen reached his twenty-first birthday he took me along and we walked into Old Man Burt Quentin's den. Glen told the Old Man what we knew. And he told Burt Quentin to pay him enough money and he'd take me and Owen away from here. Glen had a reckless courage that was foolhardy. He demanded what he claimed was ours by rights—the cash equivalent of a half interest in the Mashed Q. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. A lot of money. Too much money.

"But Old Man Burt Quentin agreed to it. He was drunk that night. His

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

love for Tana had long ago turned to hate. He told us to give him a week to get that much money put to our credit in the bank. Then he unbarred the door and let us out. It was dark outside. No moon. Dim starlight.

"I went to my room, where I'd left young Owen asleep on my bed. He and Glen shared the room next to mine. Glen said he was going to the barn for something.

"I was getting young Owen awake when I heard the shots. I started to go out, but Owen was scared and I was scared for him. I knew they'd killed Glen. I was afraid they'd kill Owen. I knew then that Tana and Birks had listened outside while Glen demanded that money and the Old Man promised to pay it.

"It was Birks who killed Glen. I know that though nobody ever admitted seeing the murder. The cowpunchers came from the bunkhouse. They found Glen dead at the barn, six bullets in him.

"That was five years ago. I kept my mouth shut. I rode close herd on Owen. But I told the Old Man that if anything happened to me or to Owen, he and Birks would hang for it. I had some hounds and I trained them to guard me and Owen. I taught 'em to hate Birks and Tana. I'd warned Tana never to use her rawhide whip on either of us again. Though she never did whip Owen when I was around and when she did, the kid was too scared of her and Birks and the Old Man to admit he'd been whipped. But his back was ripped more than once.

"It was the start of the beef roundup, a few weeks after my brother Glen had been murdered. The outfit was camped about ten miles down the valley. Owen was wrangling horses. Birks was wagon boss. The Old Man had come out to camp. I was working with the roundup and Tana was alone at the home ranch.

"Birks sent Owen back to the ranch to fetch the brand book he or the Old Man had forgotten. At daybreak when Owen hadn't showed up, I got worried. So did the Old Man. But Birks was grinning as though he knew some joke he was holding back on us. He came along when I headed for the ranch with the Old Man.

"The joke, if you can call it that, was on Birks. It was horrible and ghastly. We found Owen with his hands tied high to the top of a snubbing post in one of the corrals. His shirt was off and his back was covered with dried blood. It looked as though it had been cut in strips by a dull knife. He was still unconscious.

"Tana lay dead in the corral dirt. She still had the bloody rawhide whip in her hand. She was no longer beautiful. Her throat was torn and blood spattered her clothes. The pack of hounds were still guarding Owen; I had to call them off. Tana had locked 'em in the barn but they had chewed and dug their way out.

"Birks was like a madman. It wasn't grief. He didn't love his mother with any real affection; she was a she-cougar with a big lion cub. But he'd depended on her in handling the Old Man. She had the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

clever, cunning brain. His is brute strength and cold-blooded swagger. I looked at Birks and I knew he was scared. There was fear in his yellow eyes.

"I told him then. I told him that Tana had gotten what she deserved. That if he killed the hounds who had protected my kid brother, I'd hang him for the murder of Glen Quentin. And if Burt Quentin took Birks' part, I'd send for the Texas Rangers.

"That stopped them, Ike. It's still got them stopped in their tracks. I didn't send for the Texas Rangers. But Captain Ike Roper of the Texas Rangers showed up. . . . Well, that's my end of the story, Ike. I'm checking all bets to you."

Ike Roper had spat out his short stub of cold cigarette. They sat side by side and Ike's arm was around Gerry's slim shoulders. When he tightened his grip, she tilted her head sideways and looked up at him and he bent his head and kissed her. It seemed the natural thing to do and then her arms were around his neck and her mouth crushed against his. And it was quite a long time before they sighted the lone rider headed towards the butte.

The rider was crowding his horse hard. He came from the direction of the home ranch. Ranging ahead of him was a scattered pack of wolfhounds.

"It's Owen," said Gerry. "He knows I come here when I want to be left alone. But he wouldn't be coming here now unless he was in trouble."

Ike Roper stood up and lifted Gerry to her feet. He looked at her.

"I got a notion," he said, "the showdown is comin' in our direction."

VI

It *was* Owen Quentin and it looked to Ike Roper as though he would have ridden on past the foot of the scrub pine butte if Gerry had not let out a shrill whistle. She whistled like some boy, two fingers stuck in her mouth, and at the piercing shrill blast the scattered wolfhounds bunched. Gerry stepped up on her horse and waved her hat and the hounds, sighting her, headed up the slope. Reluctantly, Owen swung from his course to follow the big hounds.

Gerry and Ike rode down to meet him. Owen, when they got close enough to look him over, was a sorry sight.

His face was battered and bruised and his clothes were torn, dirty and blood-spattered. Shame and humiliation sagged him in his saddle and there was a hurt, shamed look in his eyes that made Ike Roper a little sick inside.

"Why didn't you let me go?" Owen's voice sounded bitter as gall. "I knew you were up yonder. You had to whistle an' I turned and come with the rest of the dogs. Only they're fightin' dogs. An' I'll always be yellow-bellied. Now you've had a good look at what Birks done to me. Kicked me around in the dirt and called me every dirty name in the book. Laughed at me. Put my gun in my hand and dared me to thumb the hammer and pull the trigger. I'm a damned yellow mongrel with

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my tail between my legs. You've had a look at me. Now let me get the hell gone!"

"Where?" asked Ike Roper quietly.

"Where? To hell! That's where!"

"Then you got plenty of time to make it. What caused Birks to jump you, Owen?"

"He wanted to know what all you and Gerry was talkin' about at the corral. What you said and what sis said and if your name was actually Ike Roper and if you was a Texas Ranger. And what kind o' conniverin' medicine the two of you was makin' to git a-holt of the Mashed Q."

"And what," asked Ike Roper quietly, "did you tell Birks Breen and Old Man Burt Quentin?"

"Nothin'."

"You're no knothead, Owen," said Ike Roper. "Like Gerry, you had a good hunch who I was. You both have had a good notion all along that your real father, Jim Quentin, isn't dead and you hoped he'd sent me. You could have told Birks that much and he would have quit workin' you over."

Owen's gray-blue eyes lost their dull glaze. "Tell that dirty mongrel breed anything? Hell, no! The kickin' around didn't hurt. It was nothin' to what Tana used to deal out with her rawhide whip. It's the knowin' that I'm a gutless, white-livered coward that hurts, mister. And it won't never stop hurtin' as long as I'm alive. . . . Now will you let me go?"

"If you figure you have to take that route," said Ike, "nobody is goin' to bar the trail. But if I was you, Owen, I'd ride back to the Mashed Q Ranch and I'd gun-shoot Birks."

Owen Quentin stiffened in his saddle. For a long moment he stared into Ike Roper's eyes as though he was looking at something he didn't believe he saw. And the tow-headed Texan looked back at him, a lop-sided easy grin on his face.

"Birks would kill me." Owen's voice was toneless.

"That's one way of dyin', pardner. Anyhow it don't last long. And you'll live a million years with that slow poison you got now in your guts."

Owen's coated tongue licked his battered lips. He stared at Ike Roper, letting something of the bronc-riding Texan's belief in him soak into his hurt insides. And Ike, watching the boy quietly, almost as if he were mesmerizing him, saw the dull glaze melt and the gray-blue eyes clear and shine like slits of polished blued steel.

Owen Quentin's blood and dirt-caked face cracked in an uncertain grin.

"I'll tackle Birks." He made it a flat statement.

They rode back together. When they reached the creek they halted. While Owen washed up, Gerry got her pack of wolfhounds to make friends with Ike. They sat on the creek bank and Gerry told Ike to put his arm around her and hold her. The big shaggy hounds came nearer, their suspicion turning into curiosity, and they sniffed Ike's clothes. He made no move to touch any of them.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He managed a stiff sort of grin and said he knew just about how Daniel must have felt there in the lions' den. Gerry laughed and that did the trick. Hound tails wagged and the big scarred wolfhound who had fought his way to leadership of the pack shoved a cold nose in Ike's ear and a moist tongue swiped his hair. Ike reached up carelessly and scratched in behind the ragged ears and the white fangs bared in a wolfhound grin. Then the whole pack piled up on Ike and Gerry and they had five minutes of rough-and-tumble play. The hounds played rough enough to tear a few holes in Ike's shirt and pants, but when it was over they were his friends for life.

"Birks had a bucket of strychnine baits," Owen said when he had washed off. "I threw 'em in the cook stove. Then he gave me another maulin'."

Owen no longer rode sag-shouldered. He seemed almost eager to get back to the ranch. He had a quart of the Old Man's whiskey in his saddle pocket. Without a word of explanation he smashed it against a rock. Ike and Gerry understood. Owen Quentin wasn't leaning on a bottle for support.

"There's no reason," Ike Roper spoke with a cold-blooded calm, "why you shouldn't kill Birks before he kin pull a trigger. You're quick and sure-movin' and you'll be nerved up to where you should be plenty fast. You won't miss, Owen. You can't miss, the way you feel.

"On the other hand, Birks will be boozy. Likker slows a man down. He's big and muscle-bound and I'll gamble he never won a fair gun fight in his life. His kind waits till they've got the big bulge on the other man. And Birks will be caught off-balance. He's kicked you around for so many years it's a habit he can't break in a split second. And in that split second when he sees for certain that you're all done bein' bullied and scared, it'll throw him too late for a win. That's when you kill him like you'd kill a hydrophobia skunk. If you use more than one bullet I'll be shore ashamed of you." He gave Owen a lopsided grin. "How's your pulse, pardner?" he asked.

"Kind o' jumpy, Ike. I'm sweatin' inside if you know what I mean."

"Shore thing I know. It'll make you fast when it's time to go into action. The bravest man on earth feels it. It's like whettin' a knife blade sharp. It ain't fear. You ain't a coward. Gerry had you hobbled too long with her apron strings. She big-sistered you to death. This is where we cut the hobbles."

Gerry did not need to tell Ike Roper how grateful she felt for his yanking her kid brother out of that black bog of self-pity and cowardice. Her eyes spoke for her.

"Birks killed our brother, Owen," was all she said. "Birks murdered Glen. Remember that when you pull your gun."

Ike Roper kept it on a matter-of-fact basis as though it was some common, ordinary job that had to be done and the sooner it was done and over with, the better they'd all feel.

The hounds jumped a coyote and the three of them had a wild, hard-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

riding race. There wasn't much left of the coyote by the time they caught up with the hounds a few seconds after the kill. Ike nodded his satisfaction when he saw the color back in Owen's battered face. The coyote chase had done the trick, taken Owen's mind off the grim and desperately dangerous ordeal ahead.

They were within a mile of the home ranch now. They rode the rest of the way in silence.

It was mid-afternoon and the sun was warm in a cloudless sky. The Mashed Q cowpunchers were pretending to be busy around the barn and blacksmith shop. The half dozen cowhands who were loyal to Gerry met them at the barn.

"Take your orders from Ike Roper, boys," Gerry told them. "Owen has came back to kill Birks Breen."

"And about time," grinned a hard-looking cowpuncher. "Good huntin', button. What's the orders, Roper?"

"Pick your men," Ike told them. "Me'n Owen are goin' over to the main house. Miss Gerry will stay here at the barn with her hounds. When you hear the first shot yonder at the Old Man's wolf den, have at it. And don't give yourselves the worst of the deal. That's all. Let's go, pardner."

"Good luck." Gerry's tanned face was a little white but she smiled gamely. "I'll fry you a prairie chicken supper."

She called her hounds into the barn and the cowpunchers moved away with studied carelessness that fooled nobody.

Ike Roper and Owen Quentin rode on to the house at a running walk. When they reached the hitchrack at the big log house, they dismounted and dropped their bridle reins.

VII

It seemed as if a sort of deathly hush had fallen across the sunny afternoon. Their spurs jingled too loudly as they walked up the wide gravel path towards Old Man Burt Quentin's barred door. And it was a tense kind of a silence that Ike Roper knew and Owen Quentin knew would soon be shattered by the roaring crash of gunfire.

It was a bold, foolhardy, headlong way to go at it. They knew that they were being watched, that there was cold-blooded murder in the hearts of Birks Breen Quentin and Old Man Burt Quentin. They were making targets of themselves. But the Texan counted on the very boldness of their approach to stay the murderous gunfire.

This was the thing that Burt Quentin had been waiting for and dreading for more than twenty years. Since the day the Texas law had sent his Cousin Jim Quentin to prison for a bushwhacker killing he had not done. Twenty years of dreading it. The long arm of the Texas Ranger reaching across the nation from the Mexican border to the Canadian line.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The law had found Burt Quentin.

Because Burt Quentin had laid in the brush and bushwhacked Captain Jack Roper of the Texas Rangers.

"Kill the Ranger who killed my father," Tana Breen had told Burt Quentin, "or I'll quit you. Until you've done that job, stay away from me. That's my deal, Burt Quentin. Take it or leave it."

That was why Burt Quentin had murdered Captain Jack Roper of the Texas Rangers. But before he did the job he had prepared the way for staying alive and free of prison bars. He had a medicine talk, as the Injuns call it, with his Cousin Jim Quentin. Jim was the last of the poor Quentins and Burt had managed to get him over the barrel.

"That little spread of yourn, Jim —that first and second and even third mortgage I hold ag'in' it—I might have to foreclose. You bin kind o' slow an' lazy about payin' off. Blood's thicker'n water, Cousin Jim, but business is business. I'll give you a week to pay off."

"You know damn well I can't pay in no week or a year, even," Jim Quentin had answered. "You know damn well it'll smash me, wipe me out. I got the missus an' three kids. You wouldn't do that to a man, Cousin Burt. . . ."

That night Burt Quentin bushwhacked Captain Jack Roper of the Texas Rangers. Then he rode over to Jim Quentin's little ranch and got his cousin out of bed.

"There's an hombre a-layin' at the lower gate to your pasture, Cousin Jim. He looks dead." And Burt Quentin had ridden off.

A couple of Rangers rode up on Jim Quentin while he was striking a match in the dark to see who the dead man was lying there at his gate. They took Jim Quentin to jail and charged him with the murder of Captain Jack Roper of the Texas Rangers. They had found some cattle in Quentin's lower pasture that wore brands crudely worked into his J iron.

Cousin Burt came to see his Cousin Jim Quentin. "Take a guilty plea, Cousin Jim," he advised. "It's your easiest way out. I'll git you pardoned when the sign is right. I'll look after your missus and kids. I'll do better'n that, Cousin Jim. I'll draw up a will leavin' the Mashed Q outfit to them three young uns of yourn when I die. You're doin' this for your wife and kids. I swear I'll look after 'em like they was my own. You got Burt Quentin's word fer it. The Mashed Q is theirn. That's big pay fer your stretch in the pen. It's a million-dollar outfit, better'n you could hope to do fer 'em with your hen-yard spread bogged in debt. . . ."

"You killed Jack Roper, Cousin Burt."

"But you'll go to the pen fer it, Cousin Jim. Circumstantial evidence. So you might as well string your bets with mine. Take a guilty plea. I'll make over the Mashed Q to your missus and kids."

So the law had been satisfied when Jim Quentin pleaded guilty to the killing of Captain Jack Roper of the Texas Rangers. Jim Quentin had kept his word.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But the son of the dead Captain Jack Roper wasn't satisfied. And Burt Quentin had broken his word of honor.

And this was what Old Man Burt Quentin had feared and dreaded for twenty years. There was a six-shooter in his hand and his bleak eyes glittered from his face which was as gaunt and gray as a death mask. He stood at the far end of the room he called his den, his back to the wall.

Birks had a six-shooter in his hand and there was a flat-lipped grin on his face and murder glittered in his yellow eyes. He shoved the end of his gun barrel into the slot by the barred door.

Ike Roper rapped on the door with the barrel of his gun. His voice was deadly calm.

"Captain Ike Roper, son of Captain Jack Roper of the Texas Rangers. Open it up, Burt Quentin. Fight like a Texan."

"Let 'em in, Birks. Damn your breed hide, let 'em in alive or I'll bust your spine with this first bullet!"

Birks Breen Quentin straightened up from his crouch. He cut a quick look across a hulking shoulder and found himself looking into the muzzle of the Old Man's gun.

"You locoed drunk?" he croaked. "I kin git 'em both without unbarrin' the door. You ain't givin' that damn Ranger a fightin' chance?"

"Open that door, Birks."

Birks Breen Quentin knew the Old Man meant it. He slid back the heavy steel bolt. But he didn't open the door. He backed swiftly to the other door that led into the hallway joining the Old Man's quarters to the rest of the big house. And with his back to that door, he slid the bolt, using his left hand.

Old Man Burt Quentin did not pay him any attention. His hard gray-green bleak eyes were fixed on the outer door Birks had unbolted. His voice barked a grim challenge.

"Come in, Ranger. And come a-shootin'!"

Ike Roper lifted the heavy wooden latch, then kicked the door wide open. And the six-shooter in his hand was spewing flame as he went in.

The light inside the curtained den was gray. But he could make out the tall gaunt darker-gray figure of Old Man Burt Quentin backed against the far wall. His first and second slugs hit the Old Man in the stomach and his third bullet hit him under the lean jaw and tore away the back of his skull. And in those swift split seconds Old Man Burt Quentin's long-barreled six-shooter was spitting streaks of fire but his shots were wild, the bullets thudding high into the log wall.

Ike Roper could not see what Owen was doing but he heard the roar of Owen's gun at his back. And in the gray light he caught a snapshot glimpse of the burly Birks Breen Quentin at the far door. He saw Birks' big yellow teeth bared and the yellow shine of his eyes. Then there was a spatting round black hole between those yellow eyes and Birks' wiry black head jerked on its bull neck and he went down with a heavy crash.

The shooting filled the den with

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

its heavy din. The far door opened with a jerk and Birks Breen's tough cowhands piled in, their guns belching fire. The man in the lead stumbled over Birks and as he lost his balance Ike Roper shot him.

Ike heard Owen's wild, shaken, high-pitched shout.

"Come on, you tough hands!"

So Birks Breen had planted four of his toughest gun fighters there in the short hallway and given them their fighting orders and at the sound of the first shot they had yanked open the door and piled in.

Ike Roper had counted on some kind of an ambush. Split-second thinking was a part of his job. He had used three bullets on Old Man Burt Quentin. A fourth on the first man who charged in to trip over Birks' dead carcass. The next shot went wild because a .45 slug struck him in the right arm and flung the gun from his hand. Ike Roper crouched, then dove headlong at Old Man Burt Quentin's sprawled dead body. His left hand clawed at the long-barreled six-shooter in the Old Man's hand. He had to twist and wrench the gun free from the Old Man's death grip. Bullets were tearing into the heavy plank floor all around him and he grabbed the gun in his left hand rolled over and onto his feet with it, shooting as he came up from the blood-smeared floor.

But even as he shot at the man, he saw the gun-slinger jerk and weave drunkenly and go down. There was one more Mashed Q tough hand left and he was backing into the short hallway. Ike was off to one side of the door and he did not think his bullet got there in time to make a hit. Then Ike cut a swift glance around and he saw Owen Quentin.

Owen stood in the middle of the room, his long legs spread wide. There was a smoking six-shooter in the young cowpuncher's hand and a twisted, wicked grin on his lean-jawed face and through the swirling gunpowder smoke Ike saw Owen Quentin's eyes. They were slivers of gray-blue steel. Then the gun in Owen's hand spat flame and its crashing roar filled the room. In the hallway a man's horrible scream shrilled and choked and died off in a death rattle.

The gun fight was over. Finished in a few brief minutes. The place was a shambles. The powder smoke choked the nostrils and lungs of the two survivors. Ike grinned flatly.

"It's all over but the hollerin', pardner," he called out through the smoke haze.

Owen Quentin stood there like a man in the grip of some horrible nightmare. He had killed Birks Breen Quentin with his first shot. He had killed two more of the toughest gun fighters money could hire. Now the ruckus was over. His smoking six-shooter was empty. Owen Quentin tossed the empty gun on the blood-spattered, bullet-splintered plank floor. Then he turned and walked to the open doorway and out of that gunsmoke-choked den of death. Out into the clean fresh air and bright sunshine of the late afternoon. There

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was not a bullet scratch on his hide. He sat down on the ground and leaned a little forward and put his head in his hands.

The shooting at the blacksmith shop was over. The last of Birks Breen Quentin's imported gun-slingers was dead.

Gerry Quentin shut her hounds in the barn. When she saw her kid brother Owen stagger out of the log house and sit down, it looked to her as though he was mortally hit and she came on a run, her face chalky white.

Ike Roper came out, shutting the door behind him. His gun arm hung down. It was not broken but it felt numb and he was twisting a tourniquet around it, above the bleeding flesh wound, using his black silk neck handkerchief and twisting it with the long barrel of Old Man Burt Quentin's six-shooter. A lopsided grin on his face, he headed Gerry off.

"Owen ain't hit. Let him alone for a few minutes."

"Was he . . . did he . . ."

Ike Roper shook his head. "Nope. Your kid brother Owen wasn't yellow. He didn't quit in a tight. He done like I figgered he would. His first bullet hit Birks between the eyes. Then he saved my life when I lost my gun and some of Birks' renegades taken chips in the game. And he dropped the last un with the only bullet he had left. Your kid brother Owen will do to take along anywheres."

Before he let Gerry dress and bandage his wounded arm Ike walked over with her to Owen who was standing up now. He had wiped the cold sweat from his face and the color was coming back into his skin. He gave them a sickly kind of grin.

"I'm not cut out for that kind o' work," he said.

"I could tell that," Ike joshed him, "when you throwed away your gun . . . after it wasn't no more good except mebby to use for a hammer. I'm proud you was on my side, pardner; I'm too young to die sudden. Speakin' of dyin', I bet Birks Breen is the most surprised man in hell right now. . . . Let's git your boys to clean up the mess, Gerry. Then the three of us is ridin' to town."

Gerry left her hound pack in the care of the Mashed Q cowpunchers who had proved loyal to her. And in town the doctor patched up Ike's bullet-ripped right arm. He said it would be a couple of weeks before Ike got back the full use of it.

"Meanwhile," grinned Ike Roper, "I kin use my off arm for gentle work." And he tried it around Gerry's waist.

The three of them caught the first train, with tickets for Texas. Ike sent a couple of telegrams, one to the Governor of Texas, another to the warden of the Texas prison.

A few days later Gerry and Owen Quentin waited in a suite of rooms at the hotel. They wore their best clothes and there were a lot of flowers there in the sitting room. All red roses. Gerry had remembered back to her childhood to something her mother had said. That both she and her husband Jim liked red roses. There had been red roses, lots of them, at their wedding long ago.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gerry and Owen were excited and nervous. They kept moving around, sitting down, getting up again, watching the time. The minutes dragged.

Then the door opened and they were on their feet. The man who stood there for a second or two, then walked in was of medium height. When he took off his new Stetson hat his bushy hair was snow-white. His face was weathered and there was a healthy glow to his skin. because his days had been spent on the prison ranch where he was a trusty and ramrodded the layout. He looked handsome in his tailored gray suit, new shop-made alligator boots, white shirt and dark-red neck-tie. And while he smiled slowly his eyes, gray as gun metal, misted.

"You're the spittin' image of your mother, Gerry." Jim Quentin's voice choked.

Gerry was across the room now and her arms were around her father's neck. She kissed him, laughing shakily, and tears welled in her eyes. And then Jim Quentin was gripping the lean strong hand of his son Owen.

"You're Jim Quentin," said Owen's father, "when Jim Quentin was your age, son. Ike's told me all about you both. Makes a man almighty proud to claim such young uns."

"Not half as proud, sir," said Ike Roper, "as they are to claim you for a father."

Later on that evening, there in the room banked with red roses, Jim Quentin gave his daughter Geraldine in marriage to Captain Ike Roper of the Texas Rangers. And it was Jim Quentin who was the real guest of honor at the wedding banquet the Texas Rangers put on in true Texan style for their Captain Ike who was resigning his commission to go to Montana to ramrod the big Mashed Q outfit.

Nobody figured that Ike Roper was looking too far ahead when he said he'd teach their youngsters to ride—on the Bogus Brown.

THE END

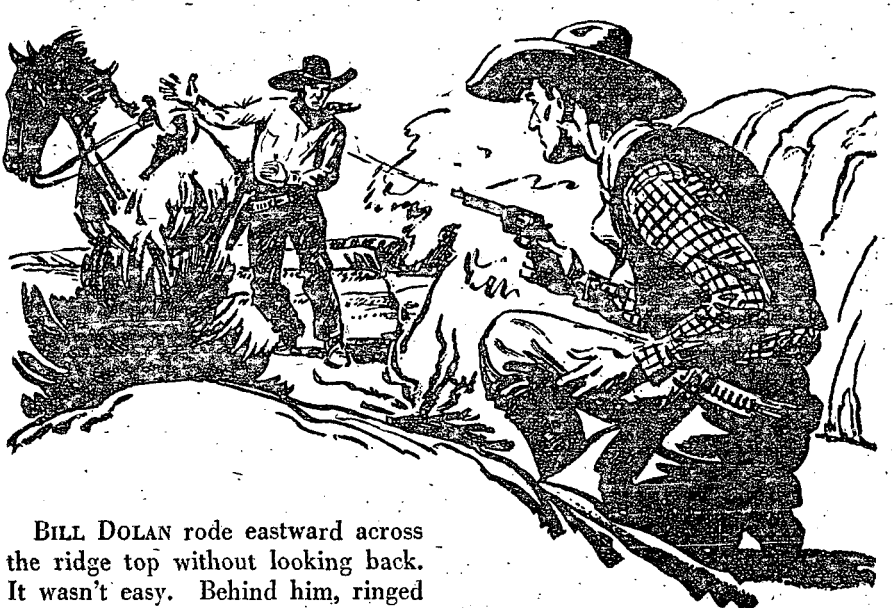
Support your local paper salvage drive. Your scrap paper can help finish up the scrap over there.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BOUNTY BUSCADERO

by S. OMAR BARKER

Bill Dolan found it easy enough to trap a wanted man—but was the hombre a fugitive from the law or the owlhoot?



BILL DOLAN rode eastward across the ridge top without looking back. It wasn't easy. Behind him, ringed by rusty hills now ruddy in the first glint of rising sun, lay the valley that some long-forgotten Spaniard had named El Valle del Ojo Feliz—Valley of the Happy Spring. But even happy springs sometimes go dry.

Bill knew what he could see if he looked back: a small cluster of ranch buildings and pole corrals that for four years he had called his own; a low, cedar-crested hill with a grave on it; and far in the distance beyond folded hills, blue smoke rising from the first morning fires of the V Slash V, whose owner had a daughter named Jeanne—"blue of eye and fair to see, oh, fair to see."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A grave, a ranch, a girl — these were things a man could saddle up and leave if he put his mind to it—and if he still had a saddle. Bill did. A saddle, a horse, a rope and a gun, and that was about all, except the well-worn cowpuncher rigging he wore, a pride-stiff neck and a whipped look in his eyes.

Bill Dolan was of a build to top a pole-corral fence in two long-legged lifts. His hair was black, but the brown of his face was the leather of wind and sun, not a dark complexion. At twenty-five he was sober of mind and of habit, hard of muscle and maybe a little hard of eye. Yet he still had a grin that came on slow to match his range-bred drawl—but not his draw. For though he had never shot at a man in his life, his well-worn .45 rode easy in its holster, easy to lift, quick and sure to fire.

The answer to that was jackrabbits. Bill made a practice of shooting them, squatted or on the run, not only to rid the range of pests but also "to keep his gun limber," prideful of the feeling it gives a man to be able to point a gun quick and know where the bullet is going.

Whatever frazzled half hitch of his heart strings had tried to tie him to the Valley of the Happy Spring, Bill Dolan believed he had now cut them free with the cold knife of reason. The logic of it was plain and simple: four drought-cursed years trying to make good on a ranch bought with borrowed money, at the same time supplying the best possible personal and medical care for his widowed, invalid mother, had turned him up worse than broke. The month-old grave on the cedar-crested hill had now released him from one obligation he had never considered a burden. And the long-suffering bank that held his notes had finally been compelled to take his ranch.

What was there left to stay for? The girl? Jeanne Lamady's father, his own V Slash V blessed by permanent creeks and a reserve of cash from thrifty bygone years, had bought Bill's foreclosed outfit from the bank and offered Bill Dolan a job ramrodding it. But the same cowboy pride that had not let Bill court a girl from a pot-hole of debt, would not now permit him to stay and court her from a foothold on her own father's pay roll.

Besides, he doggedly reminded himself, Jeanne Lamady was already a staked claim. Time and again, passing the post office, he had carried her another man's letters and mailed hers in return. Some times he had half suspected Jeanne of parading this absent suitor just to lead him on by stirring up a little competition, as women sometimes do. The challenge had been mighty tempting but he had managed to keep his feelings to himself—unless, maybe, his eyes had betrayed him. The letters had borne the postmarks of various places in the Cimarron country and it was to the Cimarron that Bill Dolan now had it in mind to ride. But for a different reason.

That reason was money. The ranch foreclosure had paid off the bank, but Bill still owed doctor bills, hospital bills, drug-store bills—even an undertaker's bill for burying his mother. It would take a bitterly long

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

time even at a segundo's wages to pay them. Up on the Cimarron he might find a way to get it quicker, if Black Jack, Hoot Harrison and their gang were still operating from there. At nineteen Bill had followed the roundup with them. But when Black Jack and three others had swapped their ropes for guns and organized to pull their first train robbery, Bill Dolan had pulled out.

"My old man's dead, but I've got a mother to think about," he had told them.

Black Jack had taken it good-humoredly, like he took everything:

"Sure. You're dead right, kid," he had laughed. "But somebody's got to teach them railroads and express companies not to be so careless with their money, ain't they? Any time you need a lift, just let us know. I figger we're goin' to have plenty."

Now, leaving behind him the wreckage of four years of honest effort, Bill Dolan crossed the ridge without looking back and headed for the Cimarron.

At the little Mexican store-post office in the *placita* of San Bernardo, two days' ride from the Valley of the Happy Spring, Bill Dolan spent his last dollar for a can of tomatoes, a can of sardines, crackers and a little salt, taking his change in cartridges for his .45.

On the wall over the old spool case whose drawers now served for postmaster's records instead of thread, the bold black print, "$1,000 REWARD," on a poster caught his eye. The shriveled Mexican *estafetero* saw Bill reading it and volunteered an apology:

"Those *noticia* gots tore off leetle beet w'en I'm open heem," he apologized. "What she gots for first name, I dunno."

Sure enough, Bill Dolan saw that part of the poster was torn off. But the essential facts were there: $1,000 reward would be paid by Wells Fargo Express Co. for the capture, dead or alive, of a man wanted for robbery. Part of the description was gone but what remained said that the wanted man was of reddish hair and heavily freckled complexion. The name "Rhodes" was intact, but all that remained of the outlaw's first name were the two final letters: "ty."

"Maybe you like to caught thees *bándido* myself," suggested the talkative postmaster. "Thass lotsa *dinero*, señor!"

It was "lotsa dinero," and because the need for money was uppermost in Bill Dolan's mind, the poster hit him right between the eyes. He knew that there were man hunters who made good money collecting rewards on any wanted man they could drag in, dead or alive—more often dead. "Bounty hunters," they were called. Bill Dolan knew that he could cut sign, trail and shoot with the best of them. Why shouldn't he take a whirl at it—with or without a star? What could he lose?

As he rode on out of San Bernardo, there was one thing that bothered him. It was the incomplete name on the wanted poster: "——ty Rhodes." The letters he had so often carried to Jeanne Lamady had borne the name "J. D. Rhodes," and he had heard

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the girl speak of Rhodes as "Dusty." Of one thing Bill was sure: if her "letter-courtin'" suitor had turned outlaw, Jeanne Lamady didn't know it.

It gave Bill Dolan a queer, guilty feeling to pass within easy riding reach of a ranchhouse the next day without stopping. He knew he would be welcomed, fed and no questions asked, either about his business or his destination. But he didn't stop. Late that afternoon he shot a cottontail, dressed it out, built a little fire in the lee of a boulder, spitted the pink meat on a stick, salted it, and squatted on his heels to roast his dinner over the fire. For the first time in his life he felt like a stranger to himself. Something about the situation made him grin sardonically. He tipped his dusty black hat back off his forehead to relieve the sweat band.

"Now if this ain't the devil of a way for a full-growed cowhand to be doin'!" he hurrawed himself out loud.

"Yeah . . . ain't it?" said a businesslike voice almost at his elbow. "Better put 'em up, cousin!"

Startled out of his hide, Bill made himself turn slowly, deliberately, still holding the rabbit over the fire. His hazel-gray eyes looked straight into the round black hole of a six-gun barrel, held steady in the freckled hand of a sandy-hued hombre, equally freckled on the face. As Bill Dolan's eyes met his, the reddish man hesitantly holstered his gun.

"Slips!" he said. "I couldn't see your face with your hat jogged back thataway. I thought you might be somebody else."

Bill shrugged. "Maybe I am," he drawled. "You huntin' somebody special, or just out for meat?"

The rusty-looking man batted his eyes suspiciously.

"Heard you shoot that rabbit," he said. "Cowboys that ain't on the dodge usually stop in at ranches and cow camps for their meals."

"Maybe I like rabbit."

"Maybe you don't, too. Maybe what you like is privacy."

"I could use a little right now," drawled Bill.

"No use gittin' your neck hair up." The stranger shrugged. "I'd just like to know who the devil you are an' what you're doin' here, that's all."

"I could tell you that mighty easy," grinned Bill dryly. "If I figgered it was any of your business."

"How do you know I ain't the law?"

"I don't, an' right now I don't give a hoot who you are. You better climb on your horse and pull out, my good Christian friend, before I change my mind."

"What horse?" The stranger's tone grew suddenly harsh. "I'm afoot. My nag was stolen off his stake rope sometime last night. I figgered I knew who done it, an' until you turned around I thought you was him. I was fixin' to apologize, but you talked so damn hostile, I ain't so sure but what you did steal him. Anyhow, you've got a horse an' he looks like a good un. What'll you take for him?"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bill Dolan studied the coals of his little fire, wondering what Jeanne Lamady would think if Dusty Rhodes should come riding in on a V Slash V pony—the same buckskin her father had made a present of to Bill Dolan.

"No sellum," he grunted, Indian fashion, without looking up.

"You no sellum, me needum, me takum!" the freckled man's voice mocked him, and Bill looked up to see the stranger's gun out again, pointing at him.

For a split second Bill's nerves tightened instinctively for a swift reach for his own .45. But his better sense held the impulse in check. Instead he picked off a shred of browned rabbit meat, blew on it to cool it, leisurely put it in his mouth and began to chew.

"There he is, my good Christian friend," he nodded calmly toward the pony on his picket rope. "Try an' take him!"

He saw the look of hesitation in the man's reddish-brown eyes. Bill Dolan had never stood under threat of another man's gun before, but he had sometimes wondered how he would behave. Now he was surprised to find himself cool and strangely unconcerned, as if it didn't matter a hoot to him whether he lived or died. If this stranger tried to take his gun he would fight—and to the devil with the consequences.

Maybe the rusty-haired hombre sensed this.

"I've got you covered," he said, and began backing away toward Bill Dolan's horse. "One move and I'll have to plug you!"

Bill went on roasting his rabbit. The stranger was taking pains to keep directly in line with the horse as he backed away.

"Knows I won't risk hittin' my pony," thought Bill Dolan, and waited.

Still covering Dolan with the six-gun in one hand, the stranger reached down and picked up the pony's picket rope with the other. But when he pulled on it the pony seemed to know him for a stranger and sidled away. The instant that Bill Dolan saw the horse was out of line of fire, his right hand slipped quickly to his holster, and the six-gun flashed up. Two quick shots—one bullet through the stranger's extended forearm knocked his .45 spinning to the ground, the second bullet sputted dust at his feet, warning him not to try to pick it up.

With a left hand suddenly gone shaky on him, Bill Dolan retrieved his scorched rabbit from the fire, then came warily out to pick up the stranger's gun. The man stood holding his wounded forearm with the other hand, watching him.

"Tough as harness britchin', ain't you?" he commented. "Now you got a hurt man on your hands."

"That's right," agreed Bill Dolan soberly. "A wanted man called Dusty Rhodes—worth $1,000, dead or alive. Come set on this rock by the fire while I tie up that arm for you."

The reddish-haired man came and sat as bidden.

"You're crazy as a hoot owl!" he growled. "I'm Dusty Rhodes all right, but—"

PRODUCED BY NWZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Don't surprise me like that," said Bill Dolan dryly. "I thought you was Buffalo Bill in disguise out huntin' Injuns. If you'd behaved yourself, I'd made up my mind to let you go—on your girl's account. But now I'm goin' to drag you in. I need that $1,000, bad."

Dusty Rhodes looked startled. "What do you know about any gal of mine, kid?"

"I know her name's Jeanne Lamady." Bill Dolan's lips tightened white and thin as he bandaged the man's arm. "And that she's too fine a girl to be mixed up with a train robber—if she knew it."

"Kind o' gone on her yourownself, huh?" Rhodes gave him a sidewise grin. "Maybe you an' me can strike a bargain. Loan me your horse an' turn me loose, an' I'll give you a quitclaim deed to her!"

Bill Dolan was silent a moment, but there was no mistaking the contempt in his eye.

"I ought to cut your throat!" he said finally.

Rhodes shrugged. "I'll loan you my knife. A man in my business ain't got no business bein' tied to a woman's apurn strings anyhow. When we gonna eat that rabbit?"

Bill Dolan made no answer. In spite of himself there was something about this hombre's nonchalant, cocksure manner that he couldn't help liking. They ate the roasted rabbit, share and share alike. Bill wiped his fingers on his bandanna.

"Come on, Rhodes," he said, "we're goin' to hunt up the nearest sheriff. There's a ranch back yonder a piece we'll head for an' see if we can borrow you a pony."

Rhodes shook his head.

"You listen to me, young feller," he said earnestly. "You're wastin' your time. There ain't no bounty on my head—an' never was. If you could read, you'd know I ain't the man described on that wanted poster. The fact is, I'm—"

"You fit the description close enough to suit me. 'Specially them freckles."

"That's because I happen to be his cousin," shrugged Rhodes without budging. "We always did favor right smart. Only he's taller than me an' his hair's redder. That's why they call him *Rusty*. But the main difference is that he's got a price on his head for train robbin', an' I ain't."

Remembering the torn poster Bill Dolan was startled, but far from convinced.

"'Rusty,' huh?" Bill's tone was both grim and skeptical. "You make up a good story quick, my friend. But it won't do you no good. I want those thousand bucks, an' I'm takin' you in! Let's go!"

"Then it's a deal?" inquired the man, getting to his feet.

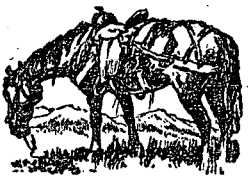
"What's a deal?"

"That from now on it's you an' me for it," said Rhodes coldly. "Meanin' if I git a chance to cut your throat an' escape, I'll do it."

"You talk purty brash for a man that's wanted *dead* or alive, mister!"

"That's what I mean," said Rhodes with cold assurance. "I been manhuntin' too long myownself to let a squirt like you drag me in, a live

PRODUCED BY DMZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



prisoner. Besides, I want that $1,000 myownself. I'm just warnin' you to watch yourself, son, that's all!"

"Thanks," said Bill Dolan shortly. He kept a wary eye on his captive while he bridled his horse, then mounted and lined Rhodes out ahead of him, afoot. But not for long. At first the man seemed to travel as well as any booted cowboy would. Then presently his gait began to weave and stagger. It was plain that his wound was hurting him pretty bad, and from the red-soaked bandage Bill knew it was still bleeding.

"Hold up, Rhodes!" the cowboy ordered brusquely. "You better ride awhile."

Rhodes said nothing. Bill helped him into the saddle, tied his feet together under the horse, then led the buckskin himself. The sun was down now, and twilight beginning to thicken toward darkness. All at once the pony made a windy sound of startlement and jumped sidewise. Bill whirled around to find his prisoner slumped down on the horse's neck, evidently having fainted from loss of blood.

Bill got Rhodes off the horse and stretched out on the ground, his head propped up on a rock. There was no sign of water anywhere near, but that can of tomatoes Bill had hoarded against a dry ride was still in his slicker. With his pocket knife he cut the can, forced a few swallows of the watery juice through the wounded man's lips, then poured a little of it in his palm and dribbled its coolness on his brow. He yanked off the man's boots and rubbed his feet vigorously. In a few minutes Rhodes came to.

"Termaters," he mumbled weakly. "Good ol' canned termaters."

"You passed out," said Bill shortly. "Take another swig."

"You're a funny son of a blank," Rhodes grunted. "If I was worth a thousand alive, I'd also be worth it dead. Most bounty hunters wouldn't give a plugged peso which. What you nursin' me for? Beginnin' to realize you've got the wrong hombre?"

"Nope." Bill Dolan shrugged with obvious sarcasm. "Exactly one hundred unarmed men is all I've ever butchered an' I hate to spoil the even number. Now roll over on this slicker so you can git some rest. We're makin' dry camp right here for the night till you're able to travel."

The other man's answering grunt this time wasn't far from a weak chuckle.

"You're half fool and the other two-thirds idjit, young feller," he said. "I'll give you the slip, yet."

"Shut up!" ordered Bill with quiet sharpness.

Sitting with his back against a tree, watching the moon rise through a lace of juniper boughs, Bill listened to the uneasy, half-groaning snores of his captive and wondered why he

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

didn't feel elated. There was no doubt in his mind that his prisoner was the wanted man described on the reward poster, despite his story.

Here, in one wallop, he was all set to collect enough money to pay off his debts and have a little left over. In so doing he would not only be aiding the law but also doing Jeanne Lamady a good turn by saving her from the further attentions of an outlaw—whose outlawry she doubtless did not even suspect. With Rhodes in the pen, he would be free to go back to the Valley of the Happy Spring and court her himself. It would certainly beat borrowing dishonest money from Black Jack, or joining his former friends in outlawry. But somehow Bill couldn't feel very good about it.

Through the first hours of the night Bill managed to keep awake without difficulty. "If I begin gittin' sleepy," he resolved, "I'll hawgtie this jasper an' take me a short nap." But drowsiness, as it often will, crept up on him unawares. Out of a strange dream in which he pictured himself still wide-awake and on guard, he was abruptly prodded awake by an urgent poke in the ribs and a hoarse whisper:

"Wake up, kid! Dammit, wake up!"

He awoke without moving, to find Rhodes crouched close beside him.

"Listen! Somebody's sneakin' up to grab the horse!"

Instinctively Bill Dolan knew better than to make any quick move in that bright moonlight. Even though he could neither hear nor see anything, the other man's warning sounded strangely convincing, and out there in the moonlight half screened by junipers, his horse's head was up.

"There's two or three of 'em." His prisoner's whisper sounded urgent. "I seen 'em crawl over the ridge. Liable to be that blasted outlaw cousin of mine an' some of his gang's joined him. If you want to git in on part of that $1,000, gimme my—"

Bill Dolan kept his whisper as close to the edge of silence as possible, but even so its tone was skeptical.

"If your so-called 'cousin' stole a horse from you last night, what in thunder would he want with another one, now?"

"Don't be a stubborn idjit!" Rhodes' whisper was as near to an exasperated growl as a whisper could be. "I shot at him as he rode off. Maybe I hit the horse an' disabled him. Look! See that shadder? Gimme my gun! I can shoot left-handed."

Bill Dolan saw the shadow only an instant, then it vanished behind a juniper, moving toward his staked pony. Silently he reached his prisoner's gun from inside his shirt and handed it to Rhodes—with his left hand. The fingers of his right closed over the butt of his own. If this was a trick, he aimed to be ready for it.

On the ground beside him Rhodes started crawling away. Keeping watch on him out of the corner of his eye, Bill began slowly easing himself up to his feet with the juniper trunk at his back to conceal the motion. Now he made out the indistinct out-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

line of a man crawling flat on his belly toward the end of the horse's stake rope.

With a steady hand Bill eased his .45 from its holster, raised it for as careful an aim as the uncertainty of moonlight would allow. But the instant that moon gleam glinted off its leather-polished barrel, red flame spat toward him from behind another juniper hardly a dozen yards away. Bill felt the bullet's slight tug through the looseness of his buckskin jacket. As it thudded into the juniper trunk not an inch from him, Bill fired at the man crawling toward the pony's stake rope.

At the same instant yellowish flame spat from the .45 of the man who called himself Dusty Rhodes, answering the 'gun whose bullet had so nearly clipped Dolan. The crawling man squalled like a shot panther, but rolled over and got up, running for Bill's horse.

For a brief moment the still night roared with the thunder of six-guns from both sides, their flames reddening the white moonlight. Then suddenly there was silence except for the groaning of one man on the ground and the thuddy footfalls of others running.

In a swift spring, quicker than trying to reload his pistol, Bill Dolan overtook one of them, reached for his shirt tail and yanked him to the ground. As the man rolled over, Bill Dolan recognized the face of Black Jack, his saddle comrade of other years. But even in the moonlight the change Bill saw in that face was vivid enough to shock him. No longer was it the gay, humorous countenance of the carefree cowboy he had known on the roundup. Instead it was a face hard with hatred and bitterness, all overlaid with fear —like the fear of a wild, hunted animal.

In that one swift look at the face of a cowboy gone wrong, Bill Dolan glimpsed all the sordid fruits of outlawry. Whether Bill's one-time friend recognized him or not, when Black Jack scrambled to his feet to run again, Bill Dolan let him go.

Dusty Rhodes, bounty hunter by profession, evidently had not been so soft. He came trudging back now, poking a prisoner whom Bill did not know along ahead of him with his pistol, swearing because the blank-blank sons of blanks had put another slug through his already wounded arm and it hurt like blankety-blank.

But he seemed pleased, too.

"Take a squint at the hombre there on the ground, pardner," he chuckled. "He's the main one—Rusty Rhodes—worth $1,000, dead or alive, even if he is my cousin! All you got to do is pack him in an' collect!"

Bill Dolan struck a match and held it down toward the face of the groaning man. The hombre snarled and blew it out.

But even in that brief glimpse Bill Dolan saw that the man was sandy of complexion, with big blotchy freckles, and that his hair was a rusty color, a little redder than that of his recent captive. Also that he was taller than the other hombre.

PRODUCED BY UNIFORM
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You're Rusty Rhodes?"

"Yeah—an' to the devil with yuh!" snarled the wounded man. "I'll live to see you an' this bounty-huntin' cousin of mine both in your graves!"

"Trouble is," observed Dusty Rhodes ruefully, "I ain't in on the big money this time, cousin. I don't know who this straight-shootin' jasper is, but you're his kiote an' the bounty's all his."

Bill turned to Dusty Rhodes.

"I owe you somethin' for that shot arm," he said, "an' for not believin' you. If you can collect anything on this wolf, he's yours. I don't want a cent of it."

"Well, I'll be a hoot owl's egg!" said Dusty Rhodes. "You was all set to ship *me* for beef, but now you've got your loop on the real *ladino*, you hand somebody else the rope! Yet I got plenty proof that you ain't yellow. I don't see what ails you."

"I do—plenty plain," Bill said earnestly. "I was down with my head under me, an' I figgered money was all I needed to git me up again, no matter how I come by it. But now I know better. I don't want no outlaw money, but I ain't cut out to be no man hunter, either. I'm goin' to help you swaddle up these yahoos' wounds, then ride to the nearest ranch an' git 'em to send you out some horses. Then I'm goin' to hunt me up a plain ol' honest job punchin' cows because that's what the good Lord made me for!"

"Well, man-huntin' for bounty's *my* business," shrugged Dusty Rhodes, "so I ain't goin' to try to persuade you. Where you aimin' to hunt this job you speak of?"

"I been thinkin' about Texas," said Bill Dolan. "Why?"

"Oh, nothin'. Only I wisht you'd do me a favor first."

"What?"

"Never mind what. Will you do it or won't you?"

"Well, I sure owe you one an' I always aim to pay what I owe, Dusty. Name it an' if I can, I'll do it!"

"Sure you can. There's a gal that I kind o' started courtin' once—when she was jest a kid visitin' her aunt up on the Cimarron. Well, I been writin' to her ever since, mostly jest friendlylike. I'd never told her I'd took up this bounty-huntin' business till the letter I wrote her last week—which I told her would be the last." Dusty Rhodes paused to sigh, but he also winked. "A man never knows how a woman's goin' to take things. What I want you to do is hunt up this gal for me an' see if you think she needs comfortin'. She lives in some kind of a place with the damn-fool name of the Valley of the Happy Spring." Dusty Rhodes' facial freckles were split by a wide grin as he stuck out his hand. "Reckon you can find the place, cowboy?"

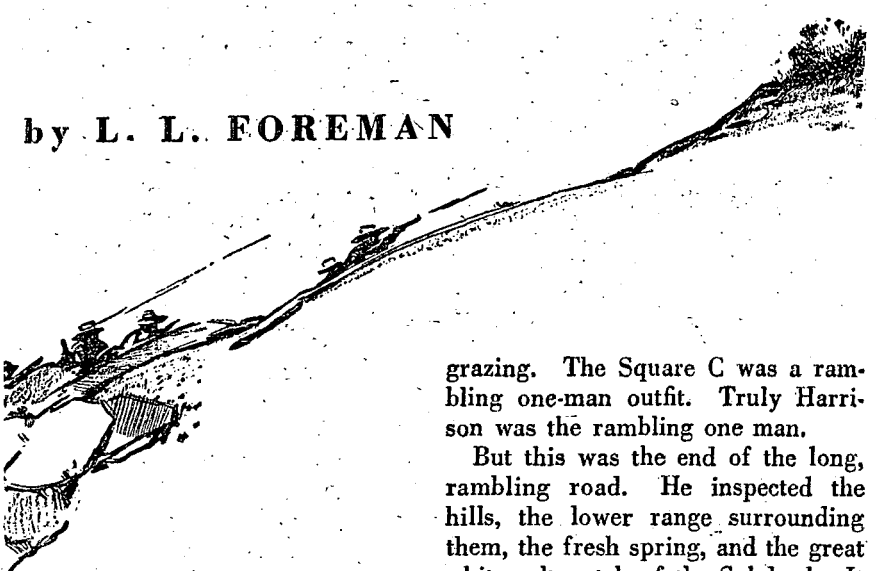
Whether he could or not Bill Dolan didn't say, as he gripped the man-hunter's proffered hand. But when he left the nearby ranch, after arranging for men to go help Dusty Rhodes bring in his outlaws, strangely enough he was headed in the right direction.

THE END

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SETTLER OF THE SALOBRAL

by L. L. FOREMAN



I

WHERE the hills were greenest, overlooking the Salobral, and where a fresh spring had carved a fold in the grassed earth, there Truly Harrison unsaddled his sorrel, unloaded his pack mules, and made camp. Meantime his little bunch of Square C cattle spread out and forgot their road weariness in the luxury of lush grazing. The Square C was a rambling one-man outfit. Truly Harrison was the rambling one man.

But this was the end of the long, rambling road. He inspected the hills, the lower range surrounding them, the fresh spring, and the great white salt patch of the Salobral. It was all good and he was content. This—the Cerros Verdes country—was well worth coming a long way to find. Tomorrow he would begin cutting pine logs for his cabin.

Truly Harrison already had the spot picked out—right here near the fresh spring, where the cabin would be sheltered from the north by the hump of the hill, but where he would

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Even though there's more than one way to skin a cat, Dave Waldron still had a few tricks to learn before he tackled a homesteader who had a rep for skinning skunks

be high enough to look out over the ring of green hills with the glistening salt patch in the middle, and even get a glimpse of yellow desert far south and grin superiorly at its distant barrenness.

Salt springs were the cause of the Salobral. They flowed into the hill-hemmed bowl, and sun and earth sucked away the water and left a perpetual lake bed of crusted salt. There were cattle tracks and wagon tracks leading down to it. Salt in such vast quantity was a precious gift of na-

PRODUCED BY NZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ture. This was a highly valuable piece of land, with such a jewel set into it.

It was more than probable that other men had tried to own and hold it. Truly Harrison refused to disturb his mind with speculations as to the likeliest fate of those other men. Tomorrow, work on the cabin.

The smoke of his campfire curled upward in the clear, still air. He figured it could be sighted a long way off. Well, that was as good a way as any of notifying folks that they'd acquired a new neighbor.

"I hope they're nice folks," he murmured to himself, and grinned faintly.

They paid their call on him while he was notching his first haul of logs. Grimly polite, the eldest man introduced himself. He was Elbert Abernathy and he owned the huge Anvil spread. He also owned a craggy jaw and a pair of cold blue eyes. With him was Tom Marles, his range boss.

Abernathy let his cold blue eyes rest on the logs. "You building something?" he queried.

"A cabin," Truly told him. He added blandly: "To live in."

Abernathy turned and looked at his range boss. The range boss sighed a little and looked away, and pensively picked a burr out of his horse's mane. He was a quiet man with a sharp and capable air about him. His manner said: "Well, well, another damned fool to educate."

Truly squatted on his run-over heels. He picked up a dry twig. "It'll be like this." He drew a diagram on the ground. "Two rooms, to start with. I'll add on later, if there's any call to. Wait'll you see it."

"I'd be waitin' a long time," commented Marles. His tone was curt, and Truly rose to his feet lazily and placed a meditative gaze upon him.

Abernathy, getting grimmer by the minute, said: "Harrison, we've been using that Salobral salt for our cattle a long time. We've had a few two-bit pack-mule outfits and squatters who thought they could fence it and sell it by the load. None of them stayed. They didn't like it here."

"*I* like it. I feel I'll go on liking it." From his considerable height Truly regarded them amiably. His long, muscular fingers were tapping against his sweat-blackened, gun-hung belt. "But, then, all I want of that salt is what my cows take. I'm a cattleman, not a salt peddler."

"That's as may be. Did you file a homestead?"

"Sure did, neighbor."

"I'll offer you the same chance I gave to the others," said Abernathy. "Go see my ranch manager. Our office is in town. That's all I've got to say to you, Harrison."

"I'm riding in tomorrow for some nails," Truly confided cheerfully. They were wheeling their horses and leaving. He drawled after them: "Anything I can do for you in town, neighbors?"

Giving him no reply, they rode off, stiff-backed, their gun butts bobbing gently in the sunlight. Truly grinned

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a little, hitched his belt, and went back to notching more logs for his cabin.

"They ain't," he murmured, " 'specially nice folks, my neighbors. Too bad . . ."

II

The town office of the Anvil Ranch manager, in Logallis, fronted on the main street. The neat gold lettering on the door would have suited the professional conservatism of a bank president, while the outer reception office could have served as the trophy room of an extra fancy shooting lodge. It was festooned with mounted antlers and much other superfluous proof of man's superiority over the animal world.

Truly Harrison, not knowing a de luxe reception office even when he was in one, gazed about him in mild astonishment, and tripped over a leopard-skin rug with head attached. Taking it for granted that some careless person must have dropped it there on the floor, he hung the leopard-skin handily over an adjacent moosehead, causing the moose to resemble a worried old lady peering through window drapes.

A door leading to the inside office was open, and in there a girl was saying: "As I hear it, he's the biggest, ugliest, orn'riest spooker that ever hit this country. Naturally, I want to have a look at him."

"Talkin' about *me*," Truly guessed unresentfully. It was not the first time that he had heard himself referred to as the biggest, ugliest spooker that ever hit whichever place he happened to be. He was used to it. Nature and a more than moderately rough-and-tumble life had seen to it that he could never be rated a handsome man, no matter where he was. In general, only dogs, horses, children and other essentially simple folks were able to walk up to him the first time without holding their breath.

He stuck his head inquiringly through the doorway. "You the book wrangler for the Anvil outfit?" he asked the young man at the big desk, and then he laid his eyes on the girl and he completely lost interest in the young man.

The young man wore a spotless shirt, necktie and a beautiful pair of tan California pants. Frowning, he indicated with a thumb the hand-carved sign on his desk which informed whomever it might concern that he was Mr. David Waldron, business manager of the Abernathy Anvil Ranch.

Truly picked up the sign absently, his attention still on the girl, and put it down again. "Prettiest thing I ever saw," he said, and took off his hat. "I bet," he told the girl, "you're kin to Old Anvil, himself. You favor him. That is, you favor his good points, of which I figure he has a small share."

"Mr. Elbert Abernathy," said the girl, "is my father. You're Harrison, aren't you? You must be." She was scanning Truly, the whole length and breadth of him, including his face. "Yes, you must be. Well, for your information, I don't think dad saw any good points in you at all. He probably thinks that you're—"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The biggest, ugliest, orn'riest spooker that ever hit this country," Truly finished for her solemnly.

She flushed. Her chin came up. Then the humor in his eyes got to her, and her smile came and she studied his face more thoroughly. "He could be wrong," she admitted.

She sent a glance at David Waldron, but he made no move toward introducing her, so she favored Truly with another smile and a nod, and walked out. But at the outside door she called back: "I'm Margaret Abernathy."

"Folks call you Marge?" Truly asked.

"That's right—my friends do."

"Glad to know you, Marge," said Truly.

The door closed.

Dave Waldron did not appear at all friendly when Truly turned back to him. Altogether the reverse. His keen face had taken on a chill mask.

"Let's get to business," he said brusquely. "Five hundred dollars for quitting your homestead claim. Sign here."

Truly regarded him gravely, rocking gently on his high heels, thumbs hooked in his belt. "Who says I'm quitting?"

Dave Waldron leaned forward, elbows on the desk. He placed his hands together and eyed Truly over the tips of his fingers. He said precisely: "The land you have taken up was thrown open for homesteading. That is true. We, however, do not agree with that ruling, and we have various ways of . . . ah . . . circumventing it. And this" — he nodded at the check on the desk— "is the first way."

"And when that don't work," Truly observed, "you proceed to run my cows ragged, burn my cabin, and raise hell with me in general." He considered the prospect. He ran a thoughtful scrutiny over the spotless shirt and well-creased California pants. He inquired interestedly: "*You* do that?"

Waldron stared fixedly at his finger tips, which were beginning to tremble slightly with the temper that was rising in him.

"The Anvil has always used the Salobral and kept it open," he explained. "They've had to fight for it. For years they've taken on all the responsibility of guarding it from those cattle skinners down in the Drew settlement, who'd cart that salt off to use in their meat packery and their stinking hide-and-tallow factory if nobody stopped them."

"Cattle skinners," agreed Truly, "don't smell good."

"These particular skinners that work out of Drew are a bad bunch," Waldron stated. "More than half the cattle that reach Drew are stolen. You can't prove a cow is yours after its fat has been rendered down into tallow, its meat packed, and its hide shipped a thousand miles off. The skinners used to come up through Vee Pass and into the Cerros Verdes, ostensibly for salt, but mostly to pick up cattle. A fellow named Arco Cann, well known to be a cattle thief, is the head of the—"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Arco Cann?" Truly cut in. "I know that joker. Had a fight with him once. In Dodge. Or was it Fort Griffin?" It was difficult to recall details, in an active life. And so much of the activity had been violent. Truly's saddle-brown face bore the scars of some of it.

"That so?" Waldron looked up. "This Arco Cann has got only half a head of hair. Same fellow?"

"Some fight," said Truly. "He pulled a knife and I bent his arm back, and damned if somehow he didn't scalp himself."

He put on his hat. "Well . . . see you around."

"Wait! About this homestead business. You'd better take this check."

Truly wagged his head. "No. And listen—pass the word to the Anvil hands not to push me too hard, huh? I'd likely get mad. And I don't like to get mad. I try," he said, "to be a peaceful man and get along with folks around me. So long, Davey. Keep your shirt clean."

He left to buy nails for his cabin. Unfortunately, having a liking for the company of his fellow man, he dropped into the Beaverhead Bar before leaving town and there ran again into Dave Waldron, who'd had quite enough of him for one day.

Dave Waldron was not a drinking man. But whenever Abernathy came to town he usually invited his ranch manager across the street for a drink, and when your boss did that you didn't care to refuse. Waldron was at the bar with Abernathy and Tom Marles, making a short beer go a long way, when Truly entered. He was talking about a deer hunt up in the Sangres, and about how he brought down a running deer with one shot at two hundred yards without spoiling its head for mounting.

Experience had taught Truly that the simplest method of entering a barroom was to give the swing doors a kick and walk on through without a halt. It so happened that the doors of the Beaverhead were not made to swing; they were a newfangled kind with slow-action springs that opened reluctantly and closed with slow and genteel discretion. However, they swung for Truly, whose casual kick stood for no nonsense.

A hinge popped, a spring flew out with a sound like that of a tuning fork, and the right-hand door stayed open. The other one crept shut in uncertain little jerks, trembling violently.

"H'm," said Truly, glancing back at them. "Somebody should oil them hinges. Feller's liable to bust his foot."

The bartender served him bottle and glass, moodily eying the devastated portal. Some of the regular customers exchanged nods of mutual congratulation. Those balky doors had been a minor irritation in their lives.

A long-armed, long-faced man, wearing an oversized hat that touched both his ears, very slowly reseated himself in the chair from which he had swiftly risen. Two men with him gazed at him across the table, followed the direction of his stare, and bent their inspection upon Truly.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The slight accident and noise at the doors had interrupted Dave Waldron's hunting story. Abernathy's grizzled face turned frosty at sight of the newcomer. Tom Marles, for the sake of filling the sudden silence, asked: "What gun were you using, Dave?"

Dave Waldron took a sip of beer. "My .30-60. The deer was coming out of the aspens. A beauty. At least two hundred yards off, he was, but it was a sporting chance. I—"

"A sport will always take a chance," observed Truly, filling his glass.

Dave Waldron put down his beer and turned with great deliberation. "Are you a sportsman, Harrison?"

"No," said Truly, who would have needed a couple of wagons to haul his trophies if he had collected them. "I just hunt for meat when I'm hungry. I won't call myself a sportsman till the deer and antelope learn to shoot back at me."

It started a subdued chuckle here and there, most of the men present sharing that opinion. Hunting for meat was one thing. Hunting for heads and antlers was something else and was felt to be a waste of time, lead, and wild life. And everybody knew that Dave Waldron had never faced the business end of a gun.

"Come to think of it, though," Truly added thoughtfully, "I got one trophy I carry around. Half a scalp, it is. Comes in handy for shinin' my boots sometimes."

He swung around and looked at the long-faced man in the oversized hat, who was getting up from his chair again.

"That was one time a skinner got skun . . . eh, Cann?" he remarked. He waited for a reply, got none, and picked up his glass, using his left hand.

Arco Cann quit his table and paced to the door, his two companions at heel. The bar grew a little lonely in the immediate vicinity of Truly, and men found reasons for moving clear of the line between him and Cann. The thumb of Truly's right hand was hooked in his belt, not far from the poking black butt of his holstered gun.

But Arco Cann continued on to the doorway, and there paused to look back. His long face was the color of wet paper, and his eyes seemed very deep in their sockets. "I'll be seein' you," he said.

"Better not." Truly's voice was a tomcat purr. "Do, and I'll donate the rest o' your scalp to that stuffed menagerie across the street."

A minute later, with the doorway empty, he remarked: "I sure can't tolerate cattle skinners."

"You made that plain," observed Tom Marles. "You damned near set him off, you know that?"

Truly nodded. "No time like the present. Him and me, we're two such different kinds of animals we're bound to tangle if we both stay in the same country. He's hard to get along with."

"He's a bad, triggery, cow-stealin' murderer!"

"That's what I mean. We're different. I'm a peaceful man, myself."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

III

Inside of two days Dave Waldron had engaged in five heated arguments upon the merits of shooting for antlers, spent long periods staring at his collection of trophies, and developed the habit of darting suspicious looks at people who innocently mentioned sportsmen and menageries.

He was heard to remark darkly that that big hoodlum—meaning Truly—was due to have his ornery hide stretched, dried, cured, and nailed to somebody's varmint fence. Nobody offered him any argument whatever on that prediction, the only point of debate being the one dealing with who was most likely to do the job. The field of prospective executioners was generally conceded to be a large one. There was the Anvil, with several dozen riders ready to sally forth at a nod from Abernathy or Tom Marles. And there was the half-scalped Arco Cann, with a small army of skinners from Drew to choose from. Nobody thought to include Dave Waldron in the line-up.

Dave Waldron became a candidate when, driving a spanking new Stude buckboard up to the Anvil Ranch headquarters, he learned that he was 'way too late to take Marge out for a ride. She was out riding with somebody else. After he was informed who the somebody else was, Waldron came all uncorked. He waved his arms. He stuttered. He as good as accused Abernathy of being a failure as a father.

Abernathy chewed a little faster on his cigar. "When he rode in here

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with his 'Howdy, neighbor,' and asked for Marge, I ordered him off the place," he said. "I also ordered Marge not to talk to him. For once I put my foot down with that young lady, by June!"

"And then?"

"Ahem! She saddled up and rode off with him."

Dave Waldron gave his team a cut with the whip and went hunting the missing pair, hoping desperately that he would not be too late to rescue Marge from whatever fell fate Truly had planned for her. He found them at the Salobral camp.

Marge's clothes were soiled. Her hair was all disheveled, her face was flushed and damp, and she was clutching a hammer.

It was hot work, helping Truly build his cabin.

As Abernathy explained it, the fourth time Dave Waldron brought out his new buckboard and found Marge not home, it was the cabin that was the attraction.

"It's the pioneer blood in her," Abernathy declared with a mingling of pride and irritation. "The home-making instinct. Starting from scratch, with an ax and a couple of tools, and building a house. Working with her hands, see? Marge's always liked to rough it some. I'm sorry she had to do it in the company of that big ape, but I see no real harm in it."

He repeated determinedly, to convince himself: "No harm in it at all."

Dave Waldron was far from sure of that. "Why don't we run him off?" he demanded angrily.

"Marge," said Abernathy, "would never forgive me. Let 'em finish the cabin first. She'll lose interest then. The cabin is the attraction, nothing else."

He was only half right.

Truly had begun a good many cabins, but never finished one of them. He had rarely had a whole roof over him in all his footloose life. But he was going to finish this one and he was going to live in it, and, if possible, he was going to stay alive to go on living in it. It was this Cerros Verdes country, he told himself, that had brought about the miracle. Prettiest piece of country he'd ever come upon.

"Cerros Verdes. That means Green Hills," he said to Marge. They talked together a good deal while working. Sometimes they stopped working and just talked, and that was what they were doing now. "I reckon," he said, "these must be those 'green hills far away' that I've been lookin' for all my life."

Marge nodded. She was inclined to agree with Truly.

They had talked the sun down when Dave Waldron came bowling along in his shiny buckboard. Dave was an angry and worried man, and he proceeded to prove it. He pointed out that it was getting dark, that Marge should have been home an hour ago, that a young lady should know better than to behave this way, and that if she—Marge—had lost regard for her own reputation, he—Dave Waldron—was certainly going to make it his business . . .

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Get into the buckboard," he finished. "I'll tie your mare behind." He was the dominant male, commanding, proprietary, decisive. His back was straight, and his eyes were stern and had little flaming darts in them.

"Don't be silly," said Marge. "I'm perfectly able to ride home, thank you. When," she added, "I get ready."

"I'll see her home when the moon comes up," put in Truly, for the hell of it. There would be no moon that night and he knew it.

Dave Waldron flared up. "Stay out of this!"

"*You* stay out. You're on my property."

"Why, you salt-stealing nester—"

Being a peaceable man, Truly didn't shoot him for that. Besides, there was a lady present. So he merely let Waldron have the flat of his hand.

About halfway down the hill Dave Waldron stopped rolling, picked himself up, and shook his head to clear it. He came back up the hill like a locoed mountain lion charging a bear, and with a lithe feint and a side-step he got in a jab and followed through with a right uppercut.

Truly shook blood from his nose and grinned a wry salute to speed. He blocked the next blow and settled down to business. His first straight-armed jolt sent Waldron back on his heels for a steadying instant. The second drove him backwards in the direction of the cabin. The log walls of the cabin had grown to about four feet high. The young ranch manager disappeared over the nearest wall, feet last.

Truly looked over the wall. "A gent with manners," he commented, "would knock before bustin' into somebody's cabin like—" A fist came up and hit him, and he tripped over the ax and fell flat on his back.

After the fist, Dave Waldron came vaulting over the wall, groggy but still full of steam. It was getting dark and he landed on top of Truly, who was getting up. Both of them went down and they continued the fight from the ground.

Marge, tying the lines of the frightened buckboard team, called out a sudden warning. She had been trying to get their attention, and now she succeded. "Truly—Dave—look out!"

Truly reared up, Dave clinging to him, and took a look. He grabbed hold of Dave and heaved him over the wall.

"The cabin, Marge!" he rapped. "Come on quick!"

A shot flicked out as Marge raced for the log walls. Truly stroked leather and the black gun butt kicked three times against the palm of his hand. The roar of the reports broke the pattern of the group of dim figures that had silently advanced part way up the hill before Marge glimpsed them. The hurrying men spread out, and their shapes became foreshortened as they flattened out to crawl on forward through the grass.

They were black blurs hardly visible in the deepening darkness. They shifted swiftly between shots, wise to

REPRODUCED BY ELECTRONIC
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the craft, and the flash of their guns made the hillside seem alive with fireflies. Truly jumped the wall.

Shots were whacking out from inside the partly built cabin. Dave Waldron had found Truly's old carbine and a box of shells, and for once he wasn't shooting for trophies. Truly got down, poked his gun barrel between unchinked logs, lined up his sights and worked the trigger.

"How many d'you make of 'em?" he muttered. Marge lay in the darkness behind them, voicing regrets that there wasn't any weapon for her to use.

"Dozen or fifteen," Dave answered. "It's Arco Cann's mob."

Truly rested on an elbow, reloading. "That carbine o' mine throws a little high. Good gun, though, apart from that."

"Hell of a gun! No balance, and the bolt action's clumsy."

They argued about that while they tried to keep the shifting black blurs from forking out around the cabin, but after a minute Dave failed to reply to an insult from Truly. Instead, he raised a yell.

"Hey, Cann! Call it off a spell. We've got a lady in here!"

The gunfire slackened off. "That you, Waldron?" It was Arco Cann's high-pitched voice. "What the devil you doing there?"

"Visiting."

"Who's the lady?"

"Abernathy's daughter—so watch your step!"

"*Bueno!*" There was a laugh. "Drag on out o' there, Waldron, if you don't want to get hurt. Get on your pretty buckboard an' beat it. I got no quarrel with you. But don't take the lady. It'll do her old man good to have something to worry about!"

Truly heard Dave softly explode an oath, saw him lay his cheek to the carbine. He reached out and checked him. "Hold it! I got an idea. Marge, come here . . ."

IV

The buckboard rattled off, not a shot following it, its driver a trim figure in tan outlined against the night sky.

Dave, minus his spotless shirt and tan coat and hat, said quietly: "She was crying. I heard her."

Truly nodded, peering through the chink. "Yeah. She's scared she won't reach home quick enough to send us back a little help."

"As she won't," Dave said. "She can't and you know it, for all we lied like hell to her that she could." The carbine spat rapidly in his hands and he stopped talking, but after a while he said: "Reason I knew it was Cann's mob—I sent for 'em. I got Tom Marles to take the guard off Vee Pass, and I let word of it reach Cann. That's the kind of coyote I am."

"Oh, I don't know. You didn't figure on anything like this, I reckon."

"No, I didn't. My idea was for Cann to run you off here. I don't know what made me think you'd run, a stubborn cuss like you. I

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

never knew such a—" Dave stopped talking again. He shivered and said strainedly: "If that didn't break my ribs I'll be surprised!"

"Can you still shoot?"

"About as well as this lousy damned carbine of yours will let me!"

"Alibis!" growled Truly. "A rotten shot will always blame his gun. Too bad those skinners chose the wrong side o' the hill. If they'd come up the other side, they'd have showed up so good against that white salt patch, even you could hit 'em."

"Maybe" — Dave sounded sore — "you'd like to run 'em round there for me, huh?"

"Well, now, it's an idea." Truly had been working up to it. "They all seem to've edged over toward them cottonwoods. The shooting, which gatherin' to rush us. Feller could maybe hop the rear wall, here, ease down the north slope into the valley, and work around through the cottonwoods till he came up behind 'em."

"And then what?"

"Davey, trouble with you is, you try to look too dang far ahead. Feller can always see trouble that way." Truly moved back over the floor. "How do I know what'll happen then? Hell, my gun's empty an' I'm all out o' shells—so how can I tell?" He went over the back wall, dropping his belt and empty gun behind him, and outside he picked up the ax and took it along.

The contour of the north slope gave him cover, part of the way down. From there on he hugged the ground, dragging himself through the grass, till he gained the lower cottonwoods, so I take it they're had thinned out, now began roaring in bursts, and Truly detected the whamming discharge of a shotgun in the racket. He didn't like that. The vicious authority of whizzing buckshot would make Dave keep his head down and give the Cann skinners an extra opportunity to get in closer to the cabin.

Dangling the ax, Truly dodged through the cottonwoods. Echoes tricked his hearing and he wasn't sure how close he was to the upper edge of the grove, till a black bulge grew out of a gray trunk a dozen steps ahead of him, followed by a flash and a roar. He leaped at it.

The figure whirled, gun barrel slewing around, and Truly swung the ax and let fly with it. He heard the impact, saw the pale ax handle go spinning off, and he dived at the falling man and got his hand on a double-barreled shotgun. The man lay huddled and still after Truly let go of him. Truly ran searching fingers over him, touched a pocket crammed with shotgun shells, and swore softly when he spilled them getting them out.

Whispers of movement came to him from up front. He rose to his knees, raised the shotgun hip-high, and let go with both barrels. The results were satisfying. He broke open the gun, slipped two more shells in, and played it again.

The trees were suddenly alive with men who no longer spoke in whispers or moved cautiously from cover

PRODUCED BY LINZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to cover. Men were shouting curses and lunging blindly into one another. Truly got in another brace of shots, but while he was reloading, a gun spattered all it had at him and he took to the ground with a shock-numbed forearm.

He got to his feet, shotgun resting across his useless left arm, veered aside, and blazed again. A bullet came along and halted him. He caught his balance, charged at the nearest gun flash, and took a slashing swipe at it with the shotgun. There was no time to reload and he had only his right hand to do it with, but it seemed to him that he was getting pretty fair results even with an empty gun, after his second swipe. He lurched on through the darkness, swinging the shotgun with his right hand and arm at anything that moved within his reach.

At the last fringe of the grove Truly paused, knelt, and managed to fumble two shells into the breech. He felt heavy, and yet floaty, as though his legs were tied to the ground and his head was away up in the air. But, gripping the shotgun with his right hand, he steadied it somewhat across his left forearm, and fired.

He was conscious of a blinding flash and a terrific explosion, and that was all he knew until he found somebody was trying to drown him.

He choked on water. "Hell of a thing to put in a sick man's mouth," he mumbled, and, light striking his eyelids, he opened his eyes to find men with lanterns all around him.

He heard Dave Waldron's voice.

"Is he awake?" Dave was asking weakly. "Hey, you big ape, you did it. Ran 'em round and I gave 'em hell at the salt patch! We didn't leave much for the old Anvil to do, amigo!"

"Except bind up your shattered remains," grumbled Abernathy. He stood over Truly. "You got Cann. With an ax, looks like. But they sure spoiled your beauty! Your face is a sight!"

"Accident," Truly explained foggily. "I must've bent up that shotgun barrel. When I fired it that last time, the damn thing came apart. 'Cept for that I'd be all right."

Abernathy shook his head wonderingly, and a shaky laugh came from Dave. "Stubborn cuss! Boss, you're licked. You can't scare off a man who doesn't know when he ought to be scared. You can't run off a man who won't run. For better or worse, he's your neighbor. Your best bet is to kill him with kindness—I doubt if that's ever been tried on him!"

Marge was gently raising Truly's head. She held a tin mug of fresh spring water. "Now, drink slowly this time," she ordered him, and Truly gazed at her reproachfully.

"You might's well get used to it," Abernathy remarked resignedly. "She'll even have you wiping your feet before you come in the house. You'll be surprised, the miracles a woman can do. I think you're right, Dave. We'll try it. By June, *she'll* fix him!"

THE END

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WINTER RIDIN'

by JOE RODRIGUEZ

Most any man that savvies what cowpunchin' is about,
Will tell you that it ain't no snap like some might figure out,
Especially in winter when the cold winds whip an' blow
Across the bleak old sweepin' prairies blanketed with snow.
For then he's got to be up early, saddle up an' get
While all the world is still in bed an' far from wakin' yet;
Which means a heap of ridin', for when daylight comes around,
He's done topped off his pony an' he's covered up the ground.

He's got to make each windmill, break the ice in every trough,
An' if the winter's let the hammer down an' gotten rough,
It means some worry 'bout the cows that's lookin' weak an' bad,
A-buckin' snow an' cold to bring them to the feedin' shed.
He rides along the drift fence then, a-turnin' back each stray,
An' slings some poor lost dogie 'cross his saddle on the way.
He slaps his ears an' thinks about his own old cozy shack,
A-knowin' it'll be plumb dark before he's ridin' back.

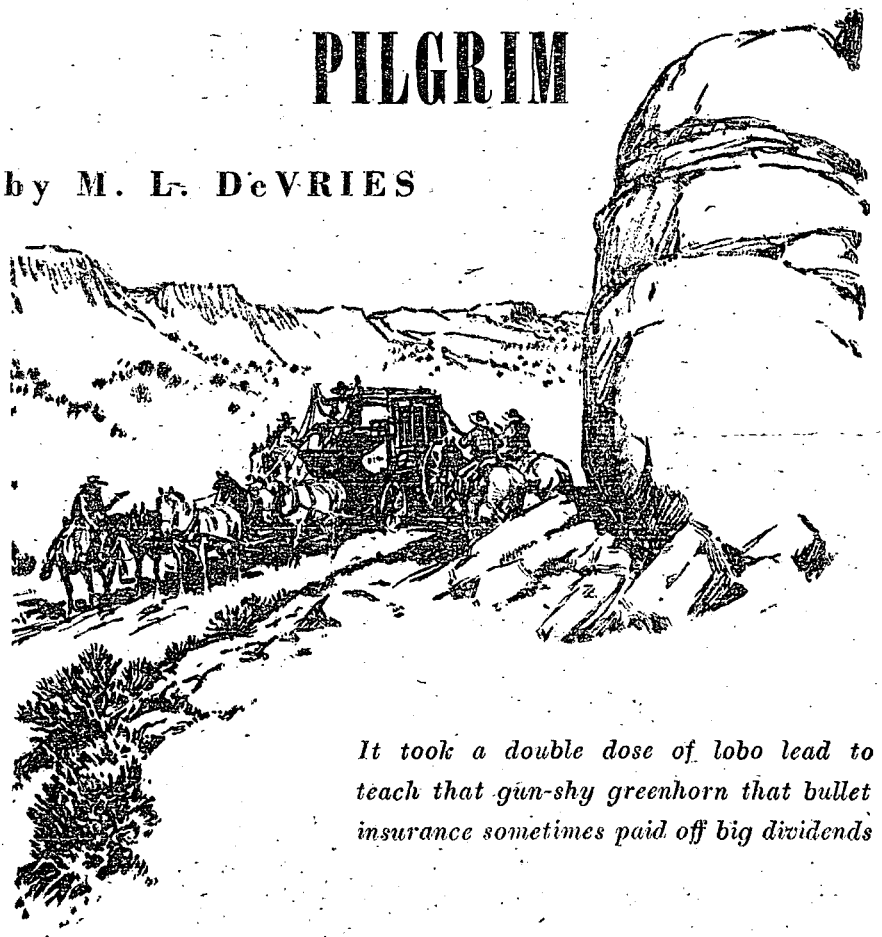
He thinks about some coffee an' the stove a-glowin' red,
An' just how good it's goin' to feel to snuggle up in bed:
Which adds up to a lot of hardship, you take it from me,
An' if you ever been a cowhand, then you'll sure agree,
That nothin's half as lonesome as a sky that's overcast,
An' you're that weary cowboy ridin' in the wintry blast.

(Editor's note: Pfc. Joe Rodriguez is at present serving his country somewhere in the South Pacific.)

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PAYOFF FOR A PILGRIM

by M. L. DeVRIES



It took a double dose of lobo lead to teach that gun-shy greenhorn that bullet insurance sometimes paid off big dividends

LON CREST waved his ticket toward Hank Towdy, up on the driver's seat, and started to get in the stagecoach that was ready to pull out of the little cowtown of Sunsault. Before he could make it, though, a commotion started alongside of him, and he backed off, pulling the woman passenger with him toward the ticket office. He did it in such a hurry her poke bonnet slid sideways on her head, but she didn't notice it. She was too interested in what was going on.

One of the passengers, a tough-faced hombre, with a big sombrero that looked as if it had gone through a wringer, and a heavy growth of

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

red stubble on his face, wanted to get up on top with Hank, but another passenger, who gave his name as Lock Sage, objected.

"You ain't ridin' this coach, amigo," he stated, pulling the red-whiskered man down. "You ain't comin' along a-tall."

Whiskers, one foot on the wheel, his hands reaching up, tried to shake Sage off, but it wouldn't work. "Git yore paws off'n me," Whiskers warned. "Hank, give me a hand."

Hank looked down, and sent a squirt of tobacco juice over the wheel. "Git on, or git off," he drawled. "We're travelin'."

Sage gave the man another jerk, and sent him sprawling in the dust. It made Whiskers madder than a hornet, and he came up shooting, with two guns. He got in one shot with each, and then went over backward again, the guns jumping out of his hands like magic. Sage stood over him, gun smoking from the two quick snap shots he had taken, waiting for more action. It didn't come, though. Whiskers kept on rolling, until he got behind a box of merchandise. There he got to his feet, and took another spurt around the building, which was the last they saw of him.

Sage apologized to the lady passenger, a Mrs. Wendall, and said he didn't want to scare anybody out, least of all pilgrims and tenderfeet, but what he had done was for everybody's good.

Mrs. Wendall straightened her bonnet and said she would take his word for it. "All the same," she added, in a shaky voice, "I'm sure it's took ten years off my life, and at my age that's about all I can afford."

"I'll give you a hand, lady," Crest offered. "Hank's itchin' to go."

He put her in the seat next to the other pilgrim, who said his name was Abner Pruitt. Crest and Sage sat together on the other seat, riding backward as the stage rolled out of town. Again Sage apologized.

"I don't have anything against him, personally," he explained, "but I was thinking of you folks. If you've got any valuables, you might like to keep them."

"You mean he's a thief?" Mrs. Wendall exclaimed.

"A Western badman, ma'am," said Sage. "A road agent. He robs the stages." He turned to Crest. "Didn't you recognize him?"

Crest shook his head. "I don't know very many road agents."

"His name's Blackie Blue," Sage went on. "He's took more cash off this line than the owners. There's lots of pilgrims comin' into the country with money in their jeans—real money to buy ranches and stock."

"Yeah, that's true," agreed Crest.

"He operates mostly in Calf Creek Gulch. We'll be gettin' there directly, but he ain't likely to bother us today, after what's happened."

"Oh, dear, I hope not!" Mrs. Wendall exclaimed. "Not that I've got any valuables."

"I figure he thought he'd ride up there with Hank, and try to find out something about you folks. Some

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of these pilgrims are gettin' mighty cagey with their money."

"You can't blame them for that after all the holdups that've been goin' on out here," put in Crest.

"You sure can't," Sage agreed. "Personally, I don't aim to lose a dime to any of 'em." He patted his gun holster affectionately.

"I don't either," Pruitt put in for the first time, "but I don't need a gun to take care of what I've got."

"There ain't anything else, is there?" Sage retorted.

Pruitt tapped his forehead. "You can use your head."

"Oh, I see," Sage answered, "Hmmm! I see." He gave Crest a wink. "Well, everybody to their own fancy."

"I never shot a gun in my life," declared Pruitt. "I don't like weapons. I wouldn't own one of the things."

Crest pursed his lips. "Well, they're handy sometimes," he drawled.

"Coming out here permanent?" Sage asked Pruitt.

"Er . . . perhaps, if I like the country."

Mrs. Wendall turned out to be the talker of the party. She said they were from Ohio. "I mean . . . I am," she corrected herself quickly when she saw Pruitt frown. "I . . . I don't know about Mr. Pruitt."

She was going to visit her son who had bought a ranch in the Sin Patrón Valley. He had written that he had five hundred head of cattle, and she thought he wanted her to come out, and help with the milking.

For a moment there was a dead silence. Then Crest said, with a straight face: "That'll be quite a chore every day, ma'am, unless you're a fast milker."

Sage remarked what a small world it was. He had just bought a place out there, too, and was going out to have a look at it. "We might be neighbors, Mrs. Wendall."

"That would be nice," declared Mrs. Wendall.

With another wink at Crest, Sage said she'd have to teach him how to milk. "Here I've been messin' around with cows all my life, and don't know how to milk. How does it go, ma'am?"

After a flustered moment, Mrs. Wendall said she didn't think she could explain. You had to do it to learn.

"Mebbe I ain't got the brains to learn, anyhow," Sage said, with a wry look at Pruitt.

"You'll have to have," Pruitt retorted. "You can't shoot it out of them, I know that."

"Well, the time may come when you'll change your mind about guns," Sage retorted dryly.

Pruitt was going to reply, but Mrs. Wendall broke in to ask where Crest was going.

"Only to Perry Springs," Crest said. "I know a horse up there I want to buy, if I cin git the right price. I had some bad luck the other day. My horse broke his leg, an' I had to shoot him."

Mrs. Wendall tch-tched sympathetically. Sage started to doze off, and by the time they reached Calf Creek Gulch he was sound asleep in his

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

corner. Otherwise, he might have done something about the four masked men who rode out from behind a big rock, and stopped them before they got halfway through the Gulch. Crest didn't notice them, either. When Hank stopped, Crest thought he was giving his horses a rest. The first any of them knew what was happening was when a masked man stuck his head in the door, and told them to get out.

"It's a holdup," he announced. "Just take it easy, and you won't git hurt. Step down, lady. You gents git movin'." He prodded Sage awake with the gun barrel.

Crest recognized him. It was the same man with whom Sage had had the fracas back in Sunsault. Sage made a quick move for his gun, then thought better of it and got down. Both he and Crest kept their hands in the air.

"Damned coyotes," Sage muttered angrily.

"Shut up, or I'll drill yuh," the outlaw rasped in a savage voice.

Hank kept his hands in the air, too, but to show how he felt, he spat tobacco juice at the nearest outlaw, and had the satisfaction of making him back off a ways.

When she saw what Crest and Sage did, Mrs. Wendall put her hands in the air, too. She was in a bad flutter, and knocked her bonnet sideways again, but she was too scared to straighten it. Pruitt threw his wallet on the ground, and said the bandits could have it. "There isn't much in it, anyway."

"Hand it up here, and I'll take a look," the outlaw ordered brusquely.

Pruitt obeyed with alacrity.

The outlaw examined it thoroughly, and threw it down. "Where's the rest o' yore cash, stranger? We ain't interested in small change."

"That's all I've got."

"In a pig's eye! Stanch, c'mere an'—"

"I've talked with 'em," Sage broke in. "They don't have any cash."

"Shut up, an' keep yore hands up. Stanch, take their guns." The outlaw motioned at Crest and Sage.

Stanch did what he was told, sliding the two guns in his back pockets. Then he gave Pruitt a thorough search, but didn't find anything.

"If you're holdin' out, mister," Whiskers threatened, "you'll wish you hadn't."

Pruitt didn't answer.

Whiskers scratched his head, as if he didn't know what to do next. "All right, boys," he told his men finally, "this is a bust. I figured the pilgrim had cash, but I got it wrong. Pile in, folks."

They filed back into the coach and Hank untwisted his long legs and lifted the reins. "Next time you ornery coyotes might have the decency to wait 'til I git all the way up the hill," he yelled back.

One of the outlaws took a shot at him, but that was all the shooting that occurred.

Mrs. Wendall leaned back in the seat, and tried to catch her breath. Sage asked the others if they had recognized the outlaw, and Crest said he had.

"I'm surprised he didn't take it

PRODUCED BY UMZ CORP.
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out on you for what you did to him back in town," he remarked.

"Mebbe he figured I didn't recognize him. He wouldn't want me to put two and two together if he could help it."

"Yeah, I guess that's right."

"Next time I'll shoot his eyes out."

In spite of what had happened, Pruitt couldn't help smiling. "Somehow or other," he remarked slyly, "your guns didn't seem to come in very handy."

"Nor your brains, either," Sage flared back.

"Oh, I don't know," Pruitt stated.

"Agh!" Sage snorted. "If you'd had any cash, they'd have got it."

"You think so, eh?" He hesitated a moment, then turned to Mrs. Wendall. "Mary," he said, "let me have your bonnet." Still smiling at the surprise he had in store for them, he added: "Mary's my wife—and the best banker in the world." Deftly he slit the basting in the lining of the bonnet, and drew out ten crisp one-thousand-dollar bills. "You see, all you've got to do is use your head."

"Or mine," his wife put in with a smile.

"We've bought a ranch, and this is the money to pay for it. We wrote and told the owner we'd pay cash as soon as we got there, and we didn't intend to get there empty-handed. What do you say now—about your guns?"

"A mighty handy article," Sage said, "and you're lookin' right into the barrel of one, mister. Hand over that cash and don't waste any time."

"But the . . . the outlaw took your gun," stuttered Pruitt.

"One of them," Sage corrected. "Hand it over."

Pruitt's hands shook. The money slid to the floor, out of his nerveless fingers.

"But, Mr. Sage!" cried Mrs. Wendall. "You—"

"The name's Blue," Sage told her. "Blackie Blue. You pilgrims been gettin' much too smart lately. I figured you had cash on you when you got off the train. That little fracas in town was a put-up job so you'd see how I stood agin' outlaws. So was that holdup a minute ago, so this gent here wouldn't have a gun when I made my play. I figured you'd do some crowin' after it was over." He leered triumphantly. "Brains are okay, mister, but you've got to have enough of them to make it count. Brains—and a gun." He bent down, and started to scoop up the bills.

Suddenly Crest's gun, one the four outlaws had missed, came out from a concealed arm holster, and crashed down on the outlaw's head. Sage toppled to the floor. Pruitt pulled his legs up, then, when Sage was under them, drove them down again into the small of the bandit's back. The two blows almost finished Sage, but not quite. He managed to twist around, his gun hand braced against his belly and the floor. Crest was the one he was after. His eyes glared up with savage hate, with the will to kill before being killed.

Crest waited it out. It was only a split second of time. He waited it out until he knew the outlaw was

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

going to shoot before going under, until he heard the click of the trigger. Then he fired, for keeps.

The rest of the trip to Perry Spring was uneventful. Pruitt seemed to be doing a lot of thinking. Crest explained he wasn't just a cowboy who had happened along. He hadn't lost his horse. That was just a story to throw off Sage's suspicions. He was, in fact, the owner of the ranch the Pruitts were going to buy, and when he got their letter saying they were coming, ready to pay cash on the barrelhead, he figured he'd better go and meet them so they, and the money, would get there safely.

"I didn't want to let on who I was and why I came, because it might've made you folks feel kind of foolish," he concluded. "I had Sage figured out from the start, and what kind of a play he was making, so I had my extra gun in an arm holster. I figured it'd come in handy."

"Yeah," Pruitt agreed. "That was a smart thing to do." He turned, and stared out across the dry dusty land again. He did it so long his wife finally asked what on earth he was thinking of.

"Just wondering," he answered thoughtfully, "how much a gun like that would set me back."

THE END

MEN WHO MAKE WESTERN STORY

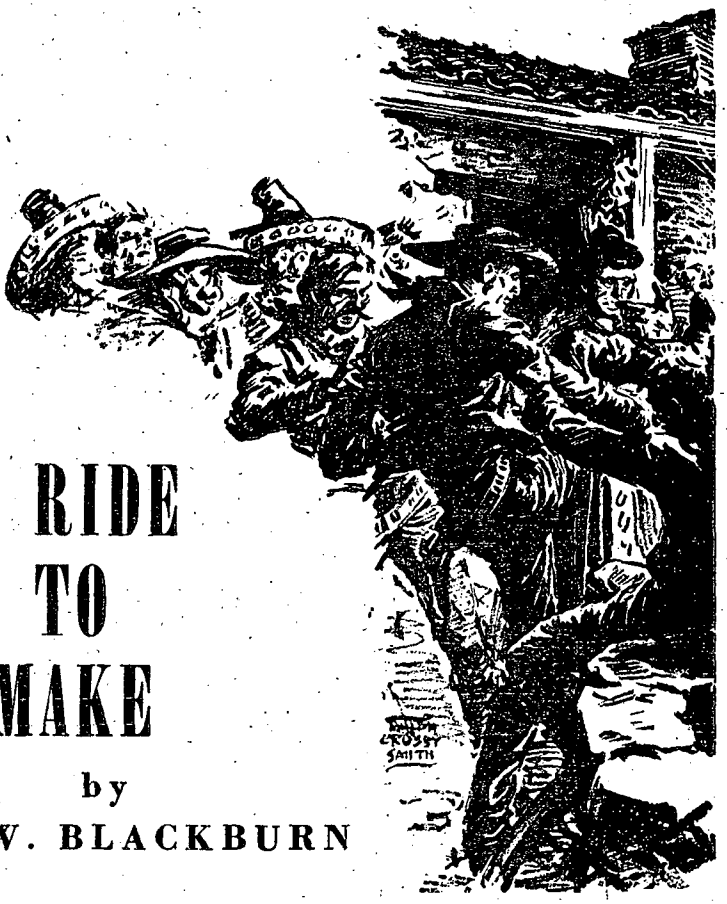
George Cory Franklin

remembers, as a lad, long winding lines of his father's Longhorns being driven across the Kansas prairies to that Mecca of all cowmen, Dodge City. The family moved later to Colorado Territory, then Indian frontier, where the boy learned a very practical lesson from the Utes, who were taught early to concentrate on what went on until the last detail was firmly fixed in their minds. This virtue young George sought to emulate and he believes it a "must" for any story teller. Trappers, packers, freighters and prospectors in the neighborhood seeking lost stock were always told by the family, "Ask Coe, he'll know."

It is natural that, from such a background, Franklin's stories have a flavor all their own. The adventures of the pack-train horse, Chief, have long been prime favorites, as have the yarns featuring the inimitable little mule Smoky. Both these animals are real, as is Pete, the provocative Longhorn steer trail leader, whom Franklin's father valued as the most sagacious trail general he had ever known, and of whom Franklin has written so engagingly many times. But this author of the Old West is adept at depicting other animals as well and next month's issue carries DUMB LIKE A FOX, an appealing story of a boy and his ketch dog. And, take it from us a ketch dog is right there when it comes to chousing trouble out of the roughs!

Also in November—Walt Coburn, Norman A Fox, Seth Ranger, Rod Patterson, S. Omar Barker and many others.

PRODUCED BY UNIZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



A RIDE TO MAKE

by

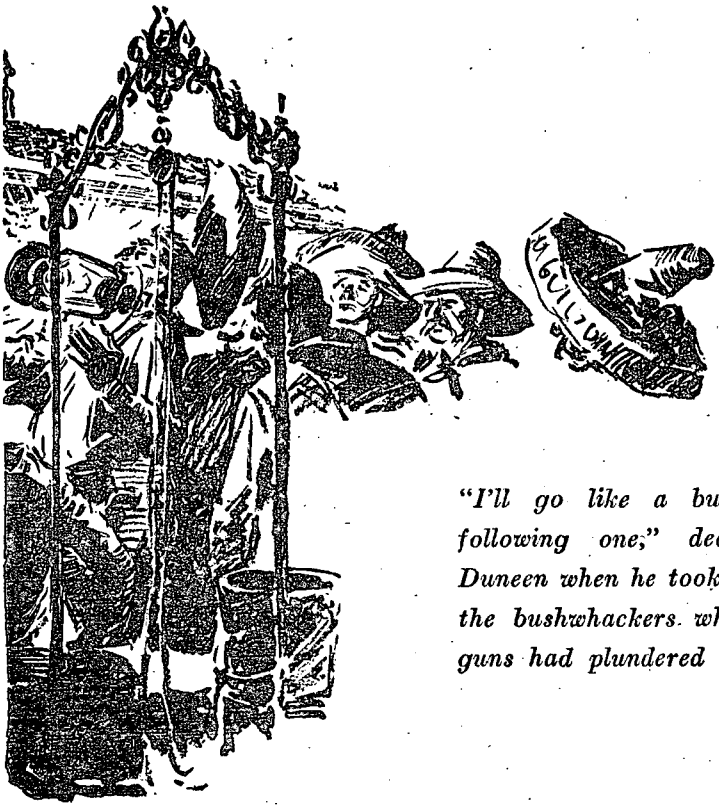
TOM W. BLACKBURN

I

ALL day the Old Man idled about the Bagpipe yard and the main house, excited but with a look of smug satisfaction at his own brains and the run of his luck. Clay Duneen, moving through the pattern of chores falling on the shoulders of the foreman of a big outfit, saw him twice across the yard but carefully avoided a meeting. Boss or no, as far as Duneen was concerned, John McBain was a stubborn old son of Satan with horns a foot long and Clay wanted no part of him today. A meeting meant another argument, and the way things sat, this was no day for argument on the Bagpipe.

At noontime Clay used the back door to the kitchen, ate huriedly on his feet, and slid out again toward the corrals. Sheila was waiting behind the hayshed, where anything that passed between them could not be seen from the yard and the house. These chance meetings had been oc-

PRODUCED BY OHLENKO
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



"I'll go like a bullet—I'll be following one," declared Clay Duneen when he took the trail of the bushwhackers whose roaring guns had plundered the Bagpipe

curring more frequently of late and Duneen had welcomed them. But not today. Sheila was a young and lovely woman with the gold of the desert land on her skin and the sun in her hair. She belonged on the long, sweeping slopes between the mesas and the *vegas*, where the best grass in New Mexico grew. She walked the dusty sod as most women walked a carpet. She was, in Duneen's book of tallies and plans, his kind. But she was also the Old Man's daughter. And today that made her a fool, too.

"Clay . . ." It was a soft sound, entreating.

Duneen pushed on past the girl.

"I've got a fire going in the forge," he said gruffly. "It'll cake if I don't get back to it—"

Sheila darted sharply forward, catching at Duneen's arm.

"Clay Duneen," she said sharply, "I've had enough of this! What's the matter with you? Acting like a kid who's had his face washed. You and dad, both. This is a big day—we're in the clear, at last—and the two of you go around circling

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

each other like a pair of tangled dogs!"

"Bagpipe's your dad's spread," Duneen answered. "Not mine. I'm not circling. There's chores to be done. If I draw pay, I do my job."

"Bagpipe's dad's — fiddlesticks!" retorted Sheila. "Dad may hold title but this ranch belongs to you as much as it does to me, and you know it! You've nearly ridden the legs off every horse on the place, trying to get this ranch back on its feet in the last three years. You'd take a whipping from every man in town before you'd hear one word against Bagpipe—or dad, either. And now, where dad has finally gotten the Mexican banker, Juan Toledo, to advance enough on Bagpipe stock to clear off the notes Gus Schenley holds on the ranch, you blow up. It doesn't make sense."

"Not to a McBain," Duneen growled. "Not to anybody who believes John Toledo is either a Mexican or a banker! Sheila, I've told your dad and I'll tell you that Toledo is a front hired by Schenley. I'll lay silver money that son has never been across the border and that all he knows about a bank is how to hold his gun when he walks into one! Sure, the Old Man's gotten his loan, but he'll never see it. That's Schenley's game. He'll squeeze down on his notes, and now—through Toledo—he's got another one. On the stock, this time. The lot of us will be shoved off Bagpipe and your dad won't have even a horse to ride when the shove comes!"

"You believe that, don't you, Clay?" Sheila asked quietly.

"Believe it!" Duneen snorted. "If it was written down it couldn't be plainer!"

"And dad sent Mike in to bring out the money. That's it—isn't it?"

Duneen shook his head stubbornly.

"That's part. Mike's just a kid. He's hot and he's too fast. If there was trouble, he'd take the wrong turn, sure. He's as tied up in this ranch as I am and he won't go slow enough to measure trouble before he tackles it. I wanted to send the whole crew in. I wanted to make sure this John Toledo parted with the cash the old man signed for and that the cash got here. But your dad wouldn't let me; it might offend the great banker. Instead, he sends Mike alone, because Mike talks smooth Spanish!"

Sheila was watching him keenly. Duneen felt the searching probe of her gaze. For an instant he thought he was making headway. He plunged on.

"But that's no more than half of it. Maybe Mike can watch himself—I've tried to show him how. The rest of it is Bagpipe business. That money has *got* to come through. We've got to have it or we're done. And what one man can do, two can do twice as well. Talk to the Old Man, Sheila. At least get him to let me head into town on Mike's heels."

"No woman should be caught between two stubborn men, Clay," Sheila McBain said slowly. "The choice is too hard. You got under dad's skin last night. He's still hostile. He wouldn't listen to me. And

PRODUCED BY ANZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

if he would. I'm afraid he's right. We want friends below the border, Clay. Two men—especially a suspicious one like you—going on a peaceful errand one man could do as well, might insult John Toledo. And Mexico is as proud of her bankers as she is of her fighting men. Mike will be back by sunset. Tomorrow we'll see Schenley and we'll have him whipped. Bagpipe will be in the clear."

"Tomorrow," Duneen answered with quiet, bitter certainty, "Bagpipe will be on the block!"

He turned, then, and left Sheila with the fragrance of the stacked hay behind her and the edge of a worried frown pulled down over her brows.

Direct, almost blunt by nature, Clay had not meant to be so acidly sharp, but tension was growing in him. Sheila had been right about the Bagpipe. If a man couldn't run to the kind of luck or trade which put big money in his hands, he had to work for somebody else. But being a hired hand—a straw boss working for pay instead of profit—didn't mean a man couldn't have pride in his work and the iron for which he rode. Bagpipe graze was rich and John McBain owned a lot of land. Barring stubbornness and the meddling of fool ideas, Bagpipe could be one of the great spreads in the country. Duneen wanted to see it that.

Sheila was right about Mike Duneen, too. Since he had gotten his reckless younger brother onto the Bagpipe crew and under his eye, Clay had breathed easier. His chore with Mike had been a long one, doubling alike as father and mother as well as brother. Mike had been a handful from the beginning. A few months on a working crew, giving and taking and sweating like hell, would go a long way toward taking the recklessness out of Mike. It was sort of like running a forge hot to put a tough edge on steel. It took a lot of heating and a devil of a lot more quenching, and the job wasn't finished yet. Mike was still a little too brittle, a little too quick. The temper was there but not yet the toughness and resilience.

Duneen went on down to the forge but did not touch the fire. He looked only to be sure it would snuff out of itself, then angled across the bottoms, returning to the corrals from the other side. Sheila was gone. The Old Man came out of the smokehouse, whistling. He was lugging an end of ham, apparently with his mind set on a feed to celebrate Bagpipe's emergence from a bad time. He went into the house through the kitchen door.

Duneen rolled a smoke and discarded it before he touched it alight. It was getting late. It didn't take a man all day to ride in to the hotel in Corizo, see a foreign banker, and ride back with a satchel of borrowed money. Not a kid like Mike, at any rate. Mike would ride like blazes if for no other reason than that he generally did pound a horse to the limit of decency. There was a reckless devil in him. He had known Clay was against this deal with the self-styled Mexican moneybags. Realizing that Clay had not wanted him to ride this errand out, he'd been in a smoking hurry to fan back into the

PRODUCED BY HBS CORP.
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bagpipe with the greenbacks, to show Clay up, to pass a grinning quip at his brother's uneasiness.

Leaning against the corral poles and being afraid to admit what he was waiting for, Duneen got to thinking troubledly about a dance he had been to in Corizo. Ned Brown, the fiddler, had been drunk. The tune kept stretching out of one of the strings on his fiddle. Ned had turned angry and had twisted hard at the peg, tightening the troublesome string. At the same time, he had plucked at the string with the fingers of his other hand so that there had been a series of rising, protesting notes, each reaching threateningly higher than the last, until the string broke. That was, Duneen thought, the way the impatience was in him, now—being dragged upward into a nasty, vibrating tension. And it would have to break.

Braced against the corral, thinking these things, and with a whole day of bitter restlessness behind him, Duneen still was not prepared when the rider came up out of the bottoms and spilled limply from his saddle thirty feet from the far side of the corral. He recognized the rider, knew he had been expecting this, and wildly guessed even that he could sketch in most of what had happened to loosen the rider up in his saddle like that—and still he was not prepared.

He reached the fallen man thirty seconds ahead of Sheila and the old man, both of whom came sprinting down from the big house. It was Mike, all right. He had a high hole from behind through his right shoulder. He had another one, badly torn and more serious in appearance, through his thigh on the same side. And he looked as if he didn't have a quart of blood left in him.

Duneen rolled him over gently. Mike opened his eyes and a grin cut through the marble whiteness of his lips.

"Old know-it-all!" he mocked, the concession clinching Clay's suspicions in one swift rush. "Go get 'em, son—the dirty—"

Mike's voice trailed off. His eyes lidded down. Clay stood up. He was not conscious of any speculation as to whether his brother was mortally wounded or not. He was rigid with the white fury of a man who has been restrained from preventing something which he has known with certainty will occur. It was an unhappy moment to break into.

"Great Jehoshaphat, Clay!" McBain muttered dazedly. "What happened?"

Duneen gestured at the dust stained with Mike's blood.

"Mosquitoes!" he rapped bitterly. Turning on his heel, he started for his saddle, on the top rail of the corral, with long, jerky strides. Sheila ran after him, catching his arm before he had taken a dozen steps.

"Clay! Where are you going?"

"After that money Mike didn't bring home!"

"Money!" Sheila was stunned. "Clay Duneen, aren't you human? Forget the money—forget the Bagpipe for a minute! That's your brother, and he's nearly dead!"

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Clay swung on the girl and her father, his saddle over his arm.

"I have forgotten the Bagpipe," he said woodenly. "I'm through. I'm going after that money because, before I get it, I'll have gotten the sons that schemed this and cut down on my brother. I'll have gotten them to the last man!"

John McBain, who wanted peace and friendliness and made much talk of neighbors without regard for boundaries and financial obligations between them, gestured uncertainly.

"You'll go careful, boy," he urged.

"I'll go like a bullet!" said Duneen. "I'll be following one."

McBain looked into his face, then turned away with a touch of almost fearfulness, as though he suddenly remembered it had been he who had sent Mike Duneen into town and against his brother's counsel.

II

It was not hard to follow the track of Mike Duneen's drifting, undirected horse in the failing twilight. Had it been full dark, Clay could still have found the place where his brother had been attacked. He was familiar with every rod of the road to Corizo. And just as he had known Schenley and John Toledo would not let the cash borrowed for Bagpipe's salvation reach the ranch, he knew the place at which the bushwhackers would have waited. He rode directly for this place, ignoring ground tracks along the way, and dismounted when he had reached his objective.

Connivance was evident. A willow bosque with clear ground behind it gave ample shelter. Four men had waited there beside the road. Grass was flattened; cigarette stubs lay about. Two empty brass shells were pressed into the sod by careless feet. Duneen salvaged these, dropping them into a pocket.

The ambush party had apparently waited some time for their quarry. This was proof, had Duneen needed any, that the attack against Mike had been no offhand trail-side robbery by some unknown riders of the back trails. Whoever had waited here had known a Bagpipe messenger would ride this way and they had known what his freight would be.

They had apparently even known something of Mike—at least enough to recognize him when he came along and to gauge their own actions accordingly. They had apparently sounded no warning, shooting coldly from cover, very likely to avoid giving Mike even an instant in which to display the quick and restless skill which had so often troubled his older brother in the past.

Duneen swore softly. It was Schenley's work, all right. And shaped toward securing the Bagpipe for himself. But to what end beyond that? Even a fool could not imagine Gus Schenley as a cattleman. Duneen's earlier impatience at old John McBain's placid and unhurried surety in the whole matter returned with sweeping force. This could have been checked in the beginning. A strong hand could have broken up this trick. But the game had gone far, now—perhaps too far.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

August Schenley was not a Corizo man. He was not a banker. He appeared occasionally, stopping off on trips which appeared to take him back and forth through the intermountain valleys of the Rockies north and south, from Wyoming to the border. He was, by explanation, a broker in cattle land.

Stocky, florid, jovial though the man was, Duneen had not cared for the thin line of Schenley's lips and the smallness of his eyes had discounted the rest of it. He had formed this dislike at the man's first appearance, about a year before.

Recollecting now, Duneen remembered that Schenley had made an offer to buy the Bagpipe from the Old Man. Hard-pressed as he was, McBain had refused. Schenley had moved on, reappearing in a couple of months. This time he had offered the Old Man a substantial loan at favorable rates. Bagpipe needed the money desperately and Duneen had thought borrowing was sound business under the circumstances. But he had protested the short term Schenley wanted on the loan. To Duneen, whose handling of the crew and working of the stock would make the money to repay the loan, clearing of Schenley's note in six months was an almost impossible task.

However, Schenley urged, and McBain had confidence in his iron, his stock, his crew and his luck. He overrode his foreman's gloomy protests. The loan was made.

Subsequently, Gus Schenley twice returned to Corizo, both times as blandly as he had in the beginning. There was one difference. He no longer traveled alone but in the company of a number of silent men who wore their guns low, who fraternized with no one in Corizo, and who had no apparent business in the town. On his first return, ostensibly to collect his Bagpipe note, Schenley had listened to McBain, making the old man beg in a way that shriveled honest Scottish pride, and finally granted a sixty-day extension.

Two months later he was back again. His demand was blunt. He refused to carry the loan further, flatly ignored McBain's protests that a few weeks more would see Bagpipe stock rolling to market and ample funds available. The letter of the law was with the broker and he clung to it. It was then, if not before, that Duneen saw clearly into the whole thing. It had not been a business venture from the start, as far as Schenley was concerned. The loan had been forced deliberately onto McBain on short term. The extension which was granted had been given for appearances only, to provide an edge of righteousness to which Schenley could cling when the jaws of the trap closed tightly. Schenley had wanted Bagpipe for reasons of his own for a year and had taken this long way around to secure the ranch at low cost.

Now the scheme was near fruition, and through John Toledo, posing as a Mexican banker, the broker had extended his original take to include Bagpipe stock as well as Bagpipe land. Just as Schenley had closed down on his note, Toledo would close on his—although the borrowed

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

money had never reached John McBain's hands.

Bagpipe was finished. The old man, too stubborn and too trusting for either a Scot or a New Mexico cowman, was broken as surely as though a bullet or a blow had shattered his spine. It was all over. Gus Schenley and this Toledo and the others involved in the scheme could set up drinks to celebrate, now—except for one thing.

Clay Duneen had a ride to make, first!

Remounting, Duneen angled sharply away from the Corizo road, slanting upward across rising ground toward the lip of a low and half-formed mesa. The faint, unpleasant stench of sheep reached his nostrils. Moments later he crested the mesa and rode toward a brushy bosque in the swale of an old buffalo wallow where the crude, domelike symmetry of a Navajo *hogan* crouched in outline against the western horizon.

A thin plume of smoke was drifting upward from the smoke hole in the *hogan* roof. Drowsing sheep, still under the watchful eyes of a pair of dogs, were bunched on grass off to the right. Two brown-skinned, black-haired youngsters were tumbling with a kid in the doorway. An old goat, milked and in comfort for the night chewed thoughtfully a few yards away.

The two youngsters gave over their play and came running forward as Duneen rode up. A woman appeared momentarily in the doorway, then retired timidly. A Navajo sat beside the doorway on his haunches, immobile and expressionless. As he reined up, Duneen grinned wryly. The Navajos made strange neighbors. Unlike Clay, few ranchers here in the high country tried to understand them and neither child nor man parted with true friendship easily.

"A night for growing things, Tesuque," Duneen said in the guttural polysyllables English-speaking people found so difficult to utter. "A night for growing things after a day of death."

The Indian beside the doorway remained motionless, making no acknowledgement. Duneen swung down, dropped his reins to the ground, and hunkered down before the Navajo.

"There was dust on the road this afternoon and blood on the dust," he went on. "You graze the high slopes this season. From the high slopes the road can be seen. Good eyes would miss little that occurred in the afternoon sun—"

This was all good form. It was all correct. It followed the Navajo pattern, asking questions by means of statements, only. Unhurried and with no sign of impatience, Duneen built up his story.

"The blood on the road was my blood," he said quietly. "The man who was shot was my brother. I trust your eyes more than the big glass at the Bagpipe, Tesuque. I am looking for truth."

The Indian began the slow business of rising to his feet and Duneen saw that he was to have his answer. Tesuque pointed into the sky, indicating the location of the sun about two

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hours before sunset, and held up four fingers to count off the ambush party. He spoke swiftly.

He had not seen as much as Duneen had hoped. The first shot from the ambuscade had attracted his attention. That shot had driven Mike from his saddle. He had carried his satchel with him, had scrambled up and tried to run for the brush. A second shot had spilled him again. The four men had come out of the brush, hooked up the satchel, and doubled back to their horses. Half an hour after they were gone, Mike had dragged himself to his horse, mounted the skittish animal with great difficulty, and ridden on toward the Bagpipe.

Tesuque had marked only one man, apparently the fellow who had loosed the second shot at Mike. This man had fired his rifle from his left shoulder, an interesting piece of business to Tesuque, who had believed the right side was for gun work and who had been taught from boyhood the rigid rote by which all tribesmen handled alike the meager weapons at which they were skilled. The final piece of information was that the ambush party had ridden swiftly back in the direction from which Mike had come—back toward Corizo.

These were scant details. Still, Duneen did not feel he had wasted his time. Using an ancient formula, he thanked the herdsman and swung back down slope at a fast lope toward the blue hollow east and north from which the lights of Corizo would presently begin to blink against the night's darkness.

III

Corizo, so named in honor of a hardy Jesuit father who had died on its site in the exploratory days of Mexico's colonization of this northern country, was not a cow town. With the exception of the Bagpipe and two or three smaller outfits much further to the east, there were no ranches to build it up. It was chiefly a trading center, catering to the simple needs of Indian shepherds, of smiths, weavers and farmers in a vast fifty-mile circle. It was a long forty-mile drive to move a herd from the Bagpipe northward to shipping pens on the rails. And such trade as might have built a stock town out of Corizo by-passed it to make this longer trek.

There was a passable saloon, tolerated because its owner, Arnaz, shifty, unreliable and completely unprincipled as he was, still would not sell alcohol to the Indians. There was an adobe hotel, built crudely on one floor about a court which it completely enclosed. Old talk credited the hotel with having once been the original building of a Jesuit mission planned for Corizo. There were two indifferent stores and Ed Gannett's trading post, a livery, and a combined post office and stage station. It was not a place in which either great deviltry or great good could be masked.

Practising the caution he had so often preached to Mike, Duneen circled, jogging in with the lowering night on the trail from the north rather than on the direct track from the Bagpipe. He rode loosely in his

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

saddle, his tenseness gone, but with a kind of heavy fire in him which made thought of food and drink alike distasteful to him.

The livery was the northernmost building in the town. The street was deserted, although a whisper of talk and chaffing, muted by distance, drifted up from the Arnaz saloon and two horses were racked in front of the place. Ducking a little, Duneen reined through the high doorway of the livery and swung down. A bright-eyed boy darted out of the office. Duneen gave orders for his horse.

He did not hurry at this, taking necessary time to run over the other animals in the stalls. There were close to a dozen. One was a sleek black, too light for this country, but swift and beautiful in line and build and evidencing fanatical care. An ornate Mexican saddle, heavy with silver and with its stirrups adjusted to the reach of a tall man hung opposite this stall. The rest was range stock, rugged, fairly hard used, and of no particular account. Duneen saw with regret that no animal in the place showed signs of having been ridden hard within the past few hours.

If the horses which had carried the bushwhackers away from the bosque on the Bagpipe road were here, then their riders had not hurried greatly on their ride back to town. The sickening feeling came that they might not have stopped here, that they might have swung wide of Corizo and eyes certain to see them here, driving on toward the rails. This was, Duneen thought, what he would have done. But then he was no henchman of Gus Schenley and under none of Schenley's compulsion, so the thought meant nothing.

He left the livery, walked wide into the center of the street, and moved deliberately up through the town. His carriage—the wide set of his arms and the stoniness of his face—cried his errand aloud. He was aware of this but made no attempt to alter these things. Long schooled in obeying another's orders and trimming himself to another's pattern, the bars were down, now. He had spoken blunt truth to Old Man McBain. Bagpipe was forgotten tonight. This was his own chore, to be managed in his own fashion.

There was a wide-open space, perhaps fifty yards, between the near corner of the livery and the little store flanking the Corizo Hotel on the north. Opposite the store, light streaming garishly through its patched front window, was the Arnaz saloon. Moving across this open, Duneen caught movement scuttling through the shadows of the weed lot edging the far side of the street.

There were dogs in the town. The movement could have been one of these. Duneen thought, however, that it was more likely the boy from the livery, running from the back of of the stable to the rear door of the Arnaz place. He wanted to think that. He wanted to keep on believing that this whole thing had been elaborately staged by Gus Schenley. If this was so, the man would have sentries posted. Schenley was not a

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

careless man. And the running boy would be a certain proof of where Schenley could be found—at the saloon. Duneen read it in this fashion and grinned faintly.

A man was a fool to take precautions like that. No one could guess completely the pattern of an enemy's actions. It was impossible. And one small error in guessing could render a lot of precautions useless. For instance, Schenley would be braced at the Arnaz place, his men scattered about the room behind the patched window, his trap all baited. He would be braced, warned that Clay Duneen was coming down the street. Tension would wind tight in him. No man could avoid that. He would wait. Waiting would grow long. And waiting long was not good when a man deals in death. When it was too late, Schenley would discover that the man on the street had gone to another door.

Little muscles in the hair follicles of his scalp tightened as Duneen moved past the front of the Arnaz place, his angular figure momentarily in silhouette against the light beaming from the saloon. However, the Arnaz windows were dirty as well as patched and it was doubtful if a man could have seen through them from the interior, even if he had been posted at the glass. Angling sharply to the right, Duneen stepped across the rotted planking of the old wooden walk in front of the Corizo Hotel and pushed open the heavy, weathered planking of its door.

The desk, set in the long, widened hall which led to the inner courtyard and which served as a lobby, was not occupied. Clay moved briskly down the hall, his boot heels sounding purposefully on the cracked and powdery tiling which floored the old building. Midway, an old woman who did such tidying as was necessary in so indifferent a hostelry, entered the hall from the courtyard end.

Duneen stopped her as she reached him.

"Where's John Toledo?" he asked.

The woman's brows went up and her eyes lighted with a kind of chiding pride.

"*Juan* Toledo?" she corrected pointedly. "Come again tomorrow. The Señor sleeps of this moment and one does not rouse a gentleman . . ."

Duneen seized the old woman's arm and shook her roughly.

"Where is he?" he demanded impatiently.

The woman pulled herself away.

"*Numero cuatro,*" she quavered in sudden fear.

Duneen released her and she scuttled hastily on down the hall. As Duneen reached the courtyard at the foot of the hall, he heard the street door slam solidly. Turning left into the courtyard, he eyed the Roman numerals over the doors opening to the various rooms from this dusty patio. Number four was in the near corner. He tried the latch. The door was locked and the key to fit the huge, stout old iron lock was missing.

He shoved steady pressure against the panel. There was no give. Backing a little, he drove his shoulder

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

against the carved, splitting panel. It was a hard impact which bruised the muscle of his upper arm, but it made little sound. The door was solid and a man could not shake these old adobe buildings as he could the newer, flimsier frame structures which were slowly replacing them. Swearing impatiently, Duneen backed off.

There had once been a well in the patio. The masonry lip and the crane from which bucket ropes had hung still remained. A large wagon wheel, its iron tire still intact, leaned against the masonry. Duneen lifted this, carried it to the stubborn door, and used it for a clumsy ram. On the third swing timbers, long cured in arid air, parted protestingly and the lockplate in the jamb of the doorway split out. The panel swung open.

It was dark within. Duneen flattened against the wall just inside. He could hear heavy, slow breathing, as though a man were in a deep sleep. Yet no man could have slept through the thunder of the ram against the door. A quick suspicion for which there was yet no clear reason, shot through Duneen. He kicked the door shut and fumbled across the pitch blackness of the room, following a faint odor of oil to a lamp on a table. Striking a match alight, he touched the wick, and stepped back.

A tornado could have caused no more damage in the room. The lamp table was canted perilously against the wall, one leg broken from the spider which braced it, and dangled at a crazy angle. An old chest, hand-shaped with bleak Jesuit plainness, lay on its back, one door torn from its face and its contents scattered about the room. The shabby brilliance of a worn Navajo rug was kicked almost under the bed. Some of the whang strips which held up the tick of the bed had broken, letting one corner down onto the floor. The bedding was rumpled. Blood, still sticky, made ugly blotches on the blanketing. And in the midst of this ruin, sprawled as though he had been flung where he fell, lay John Toledo.

IV

There could be no mistaking the identity of the man on the bed. Cutting through the surprise which shook Duneen was a stab of admiration. This John Toledo played his part well. He was apparently a tall man, dark of coloring and hair. He was dressed in almost foppishly elegant gear, typical of a man of considerable means below the border. And even in its present pallor his face had not lost the air of gentility common among those of Spanish blood. Duneen still did not doubt that Toledo was a Yankee, skillfully posing as the Mexican banker Old Man McBain had believed him to be, but he could now understand a little more readily why McBain and even Mike had been fooled by the man's appearance.

Bending over Toledo, Duneen saw that the man had been roughly treated but that he was not seriously injured. A rap on the head had apparently subdued him. And there was evidence that he had put up a passable struggle against those who

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had attacked him. The general appearance of the room indicated that it had been thoroughly ransacked. The whole thing didn't make sense. Duneen snuffed the light and moved to the door, pausing here for a moment.

He had thought that this Toledo would be the weak link in the chain Gus Schenley was forging. He had intended to hand Toledo about the same treatment the man had apparently received, working on the theory that a hired hand will crack sooner than the kingpin himself. He had hoped, by the time he left the hotel, to have hammered enough information out of this pseudo-banker to enable him to plow in on Schenley with enough deadwood to make the broker cave or fight.

This was impossible, now. Toledo was in no shape to talk. And there had to be some reason for the attack on him. There had to be someone else who had business with Toledo. That reason and the identity of Toledo's attacker or attackers were things Duneen had to know. Until he did, he was moving in a dangerous darkness. Duneen grinned wryly at his own philosophy of battle which had slid through his mind as he came down the street. He had thought Schenley was a fool, waiting at the Arnaz bar for Clay Duneen to come in off the street. He had thought any man was a fool who bet too heavily upon the actions of his opponents. Now the edge of the same thinking was turned against him. He had hoped for much from John Toledo. He had found only a tangled room and a limply unconscious man. With these he could do nothing. He stretched out his hand for the handle of the door.

As he did so, the door swung sharply inward. Light glared brightly in Clay's face, blinding him momentarily. He struck at the man behind the lantern, but the fellow dodged back. Two others leaped around him, seizing Clay's arms. Behind them, behind the ball of light in the lantern chimney, he heard a smooth voice bark an order.

"Hold him, boys! We've got to look in on this. Maybe we're too small for county law but, by hell, Corizo has got to have some order! If he's hurt Señor Toledo, there's apt to be border trouble. Toledo's a big man on the other side of the line. Hold him tight! I'm an outsider but, by Satan, I'll back you to the limit if he's done wrong!"

The man with the lantern moved and as the light shifted, Duneen saw many men in the patio of the hotel. Some were townsmen, scared and uneasy, with but half a resolution in their faces. Among them was the old woman who tended rooms in the hotel and the skinny-necked clerk who had been absent from the desk in the hall-like lobby. Among them, also, were a generous scattering of the riders who had returned to Corizo with Gus Schenley this last time. And Schenley himself was doing the talking.

Duneen was hauled a little to one side. Arnaz, very gingerly, snagged his gun from his belt. Another man, betraying a knowledge born on the border, felt for a knife and found

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

none. Schenley, followed by two of his men, had shoved into Toledo's room. They moved about within for several minutes, then came out. Schenley took the lantern from the townsman who held it, and lifted it in front of Duneen's face. The self-described land broker grinned pleasantly.

"A piece of advice, Duneen," he said conversationally, "go easy! We've got the deadwood on you, clean. And there's some ragged tempers here!"

Arnaz shoved forward.

"This ain't good, Gus," the saloonman said uneasily. "What you aim to do?"

"Me?" Schenley asked with feigned astonishment. "Why, nothing, of course! This is Corizo's problem, not mine. But I'll tell you what. Most of you know that, barring payment before nine tomorrow morning, I intend to take over the Bagpipe property on McBain's expired note. I want no trouble and everything official. I aim to send down to the county seat for the law to serve foreclosure and eviction notices on McBain. We could hold Duneen till the sheriff comes—"

"Duneen never made trouble before," he offered. "What with you prodding John McBain off his spread, Bagpipe hands is apt to be touchy. And holding Clay Duneen won't make 'em feel better. That might make trouble, too. This could have been just a tangle between one man and another on a private business the rest of us have no stake in—"

"It could be!" Schenley snapped. "But it isn't. This is my business and I don't like trotting it out, but the fact is that McBain tried to borrow money from Señor Toledo yesterday. Toledo turned him down. The Señor told me about it this morning. This is Bagpipe's answer to that refusal. And if the Señor should die, we'll not only have border trouble on our hands but a killer—Clay Duneen!"

Arnaz caught Schenley's arm.

"Killer?" he yelped. "You think there's a chance Toledo'll fade out?"

An ugly laugh grunted from Gus Schenley.

"Look for yourself," he invited bluntly. "He ain't gone yet, but I wouldn't give a plugged nickel for his chances. There's a knife a foot long in his chest!"

Duneen had been holding himself in check, his ears missing no inflection in Schenley's voice, his eyes no motion of the man's body. And his mind had been working with desperate swiftness. He had hoped that here in this moment in which the broker was flushed with triumph, Gus Schenley would drop some word which would tie him to the ambush on the trail south.

And because he had been doing these things, knowing he was snared, Duneen had not measured deeply enough the grimness of the trap in which he was caught. He had examined Juan Toledo by lamplight. He had seen that the man was battered and unconscious but not seriously injured. Schenley's bold statement about a knife in the man's chest was a stabbing shock.

Duneen did not doubt that Toledo was skewered by steel, now. He did not doubt that Schenley was right

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about the worth of his chances of survival. The knife had been driven into the unconscious man in those moments during which Schenley and his men were in the darkened room. There was no doubt in Duneen, either, that the original attack on Toledo had been ordered by the broker. Clay could find no logical reason for the attack, but the surety was there. So, also, was the surety, that Gus Schenley was afraid of Clay Duneen and that the broker, by framing McBain's foreman for the knifing of Toledo, would see him hanged as surely as he would see McBain's ranch in his own hands.

Clay had been passive under the restraint of the two men hanging onto him. He had been so deliberately, hoping that later in this game he could throw clear light on Schenley and that the townsmen would then swing with him against Schenley's crew. Early violence might have made that difficult. But he saw, now, that Schenley would discredit him so completely in the eyes of the town that the meek men who made up its citizenry would turn on him as they would on a sidewinder. Passiveness no longer had value.

Schenley, still holding the lantern, was a yard from him, turned partly away. Swelling his chest, Duneen shouted hoarsely.

"Gus—watch out!"

Schenley wheeled, stepping back just right. Using the arms of the two men holding him as a pivot, Duneen lashed out with his foot. It caught the tank of the lantern and drove the light upward into Schenley's face. The flames seared the man's face, the glass broke, and the light winked out. His kick gave Duneen forward impetus. He wrenched his shoulders powerfully. The men clinging to his upper arms, caught off guard and startled by his shout, were thrown clear.

Duneen took two driving strides forward. He crashed into one man, knocking the fellow down, and plowed into Arnaz. The saloonman squawked quick, vivid alarm and ducked back, but not before Clay's fingers had clamped onto his wrists and twisted the gun Arnaz had lifted from Duneen's belt out of the saloonman's fingers.

Turning at an angle, Duneen danced back against one wall and fired two shots downward at a flat angle against the tiling of the patio. The slugs, flattened and singing angrily, ricocheted upward. A man cried out in quick, stung hurt. Gus Schenley swore. Two guns opened up at the flash of Duneen's piece, but he had already shifted, plunging straight across the patio toward the door leading to the hall and the street. A man was in front of him—one of Schenley's crew, apparently—since there was fight in the fellow. Duneen robbed him of it with a quick downward stroke with the barrel of his gun.

Alarm beat up. Men ran brokenly after him, but he slid into the hall and before the others reached the faint light from the desk lamp at its upper end and so could find a target at which they could shoot, he had plowed into the night. Once on the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

street, Duneen veered and sprinted for the livery. The boy in the office there slammed the office door and bolted it when he saw him.

Duneen found his horse, uncared-for as yet, vaulted into leather, and was riding north from the livery, in the clear and at a high lope, when the first man ran shouting from the hotel into the street.

V

Duneen's mood had turned wicked again. The pattern of violence which had straddled Bagpipe and overflowed to Corizo was a crazy patchwork which went against the grain of his methodical directness. With McBain's trusting folly, Mike's recklessness, Sheila's plea for border peace, John Toledo's smooth masquerade, Schenley's edged double dealing—with any of these things, individually, Clay could cope. He could swing against them, back them into a corner, and force a showdown. But with them all lumped together, the thing was spinning past him too fast for him to secure a hand hold.

He had ridden out of the Bagpipe yard with two men marked for tally. Both had eluded him. Another hand had beaten him to Toledo, and Gus Schenley had neatly turned Toledo's injuries against Clay himself.

Swearing softly and now wholly at a loss as to an angle from which to attack, Duneen veered from the north road a mile out of Corizo, loped in a long arc around the little town, and struck the road in from the Bagpipe over the first ridge from Corizo, thus nearly reversing the track he had followed in entering the town. He hauled up on the edge of the Bagpipe road, his eyes toward the ridge beyond which lay Corizo, its aroused but cautious citizenry, and Schenley's force. His mind was at work, building up some kind of entry he might make again into the town which would give him the edge needed to pin Gus Schenley down.

There was caution involved. Not for himself. If there had been an edge of fear in Duneen, it was dissolved, now. Anger did that to him. It turned loose a cold stream of purpose which was almost automatic, almost divorced from conscious thought. The caution sprouted from a streak of fairness. Certainty was in his mind—certainty as to the whole pattern of Gus Schenley's operation. But there was a matter of proof. There was the matter of fitting John Toledo properly into the game, of explaining with reason and logic why Toledo had been attacked prior to Clay's entry into Corizo and why Schenley—whose man Toledo *most certainly must be*—had thrust a knife into the pseudo-banker's chest. And there was the final matter of discovering beyond all doubt why Bagpipe—more than another spread of perhaps even greater worth—was so desperately wanted by Schenley and those who rode with him.

Without an answer to these things—without proof any man could see—Clay Duneen could not level death even against the devil. It was a mill which pivoted about a hub without an end or a beginning. Duneen was hunkered in his saddle, staring mood-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ily at the blackness of the night and conscious that an answer must come out of it soon, when a horse raced up from the south. Duneen reined out into the center of the road, braced himself, and waited. The rider came on swiftly, saw him, and flattened with alarm. Gun in hand, Duneen watched. Then the rider raised, reined sharply back, and cried out:

"Clay! Oh, Clay!"

The tension fled. Sheila McBain brought her horse alongside Duneen, relief evident in every slackened line of her face.

"Clay!" she breathed. "I've been hoping . . . Clay, you fool! Why didn't you wait? Mike will be all right. We've got him home in bed. He's hurt, but the wounds are clean. And he talked, Clay . . ."

Duneen leaned sharply forward.

"Talked? About what?" he said sharply.

"Toledo—Schenley. Clay, listen. You're wrong about Juan Toledo. He's the man dad believed him to be, all right. Mike had a long talk with him. He came up from Mexico to cross up Schenley. Do you know who Schenley is? I'll tell you. You've heard of the Eye of The Needle and the gang that works out of it, up in Wyoming, Montana, and Kansas. Schenley's their man. You know how they work. They hit a bank or a train, then scatter and head for the border, hiding out along the way. Something has happened to the old track they followed. The law has closed in on it, I guess.

"Anyhow, Schenley is building a new set of relays from The Eye of The Needle southward, a string of ranches and camps where fugitives can get fresh horses and sleep and food on the run. The Bagpipe is situated just right to be the last station above the border. That's why Schenley talked dad into taking loans. That's why he clamped down."

A quick eagerness ran through Duneen. He knew the Needle's Eye gang. They were front-page talk across half the country—the most thoroughly ruthless and efficient band of outlaws the high country had ever produced. Schenley fitted, right where Sheila put him. And the good word of Mike's condition and chances slid much of the pressure from Clay. There was but one other point.

"But Toledo—why is he set against Schenley?"

"Dad's been preaching—and so have I—that there are men on both sides of the border who want friendliness and cooperation instead of bickering and trouble. Mexico knew the Needle's Eye outfit was badly wanted in the north. Mexico knew, also, that the Needle's Eye gang came south to hide out after every big raid. The government wanted it stopped. Toledo was sent up to try this. The loan he made dad was to stall Schenley off a bit—to give Toledo a chance to look the situation over. You were all wrong about him!"

Duneen nodded. Sixty seconds before, Schenley had a wall up through which he could not cut. The barrier was down, now. Clay lifted his reins. Sheila leaned quickly toward him, her eyes suddenly worried.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Clay!" she cried out. "What are you going to do?"

"Finish a chore!" Duneen answered.

"No, Clay, wait," the girl urged. "Dad's gathering the crew. They're only minutes behind me. You'll need them."

Duneen shook his head.

"Minutes run slow," he said. "Toledo's lying in the Corizo hotel with a knife through him. He was alive the last time I saw him. If I get there soon enough, there may be a chance for him yet. Besides, every minute Gus Schenley's got to work on Arnaz and the rest in town means that many more we'll have to fight. Wait here. Fan your dad and the boys up when they come along."

"Clay!"

Sheila made the one protest and fell silent. Duneen lifted his horse into a series of jumps which flattened into a high, pumping lope. At a turn he heard hoof beats behind him. He looked back. Sheila was in his dust and he saw she had pulled out the light shotgun which she carried in her saddle scabbard. He tried to wave her back but she ignored his signals. He wanted to stop, but he knew her too well. A man could not turn a McBain from his or her purpose with words alone, and the urgency of time made any other persuasion impossible.

With dust streaming behind him against the night and the muffled thunder of Sheila's horse rising from the dust, Duneen raced into Corizo. He was heard and men appeared on the darkened street. A gun banged. The lead went wide, so wide Duneen did not hear it. Roaring up to the front of the Arnaz place, he slowed. Sheila was closing the gap which had been between them. He turned to shout an order to her but the girl had already veered across the street and was out of the saddle in a flying leap which brought her to the walk in front of the hotel. She still carried her shotgun with her. A man ran from the shadows of the building, shouting hoarsely and with his gun in his hand but obviously withholding his fire for the moment because he faced a woman.

Sheila's rush for the door of the hotel was not checked. She made no gesture of raising her scatter gun. And she showed no hesitation. She fired with the weapon still low in her arms, a cool, sure move dictated by necessity and backed by the purposefulness of a McBain. The man on the walk threw up his hands, roared with pain, and went staggering diagonally off across the street while the light, almost toylike echoes of the little shotgun's discharge rapped against the buildings.

Another man raised a gun against Duneen and fired. Clay's horse flinched, squealed, and tried a pivot under the sting of a crease across its rump. Duneen saw that the man was a townsman, more frightened than determined, and lowered his sights so that a slab of the walk at the man's feet was ripped up and the fellow was untouched. It was enough. The man turned and ran desperately toward the livery and the shelter of darkness at the upper end of the street.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two other men were in the track, moving swiftly and with a lack of direction, like rabbits surprised feeding in a garden patch. These, also, were townsmen. One — Duneen thought it was Arnaz himself—was heading raggedly for the saloon. Duneen let him almost reach the door, then flung an ultimatum up the street.

"Send out Schenley! Send him out or I'll come after him!"

Arnaz vanished through the saloon doorway. The other man on the track flopped down behind a watering trough and possumed there, content to be hidden and out of it. A gun barrel from the inside knocked one of the patched panes from the saloon window. Duneen, realizing suddenly that he was a full target there astride his restive horse, quit leather, hit the walk, and started along it at long and ringing strides, straight toward the saloon.

Fire winked from the broken glass. A blow touched Duneen, jerking lightly at him and left a patch of numbness along a cord of nerves in his shoulder as it passed. He loosed a shot at the fire and a hand gun spilled through the broken glass onto the walk outside, falling thus from a suddenly limp hand. He fired again through the opening to keep it clear. Then he was past and the doors of the Arnaz place were in front of him.

Crouching, he hit these with his shoulder and went on into the saloon in a flat, skidding drive that brought him up with his belly on the floor a couple of yards into the room. A rushing, buffeting series of impacts hammered the air above him, snarling proof that if he had come in upright as a man usually entered a door, he would have landed where he was a corpse.

Gus Schenley and two others were braced against the back wall of the saloon. Three or four townsmen, taken out of this by the tempo of a violence for which they had no taste, were spread in rigid fear along the bar. Duneen ignored these. Two more Schenley men were holed behind an overturned table. Duneen smashed two shots into this shelter, thinking that in the north, where gaming tables were made of heavy stock, such a shelter might be good, but that in the high desert, here, wood was too precious to be wasted in heavy planking. One man spilled limply out from behind the insufficient shelter. The other was invisible, but the muzzle of his gun did not reappear.

Duneen rolled, then, and drew his knees up. A man beside Schenley loosed a shot which flung stinging dust from the packed dirt floor under Duneen's elbow. Schenley, seeking to swing a shortened Winchester to his left shoulder, bumped the man on his right and the fellow shot yards wide.

Thrusting downward with his legs, Duneen plunged up and forward. As he moved, he fired at the man to the left of Schenley. The fellow turned toward his boss with protest on his face, as though he would voice a complaint, then fell heavily. In falling, he clawed at Schenley's arm, pulling the man off balance and with-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

holding the fire of the shoulder weapon for a moment. It was enough.

Duneen, a scant two yards away, flung his hand gun with all the velocity of his forward rush, full into the face flanking Schenley on the right. The weapon worked terrible damage, imbedding itself so deeply in flesh and bone that it remained wedged where it struck.

Duneen swayed a little to one side, avoiding the falling man, and crashed into Schenley. The broker was encumbered by the shortened rifle he had not yet been able to fire—*a rifle which he held to his left shoulder.*

The knowledge that he was facing the man who had shot Mike added impetus to Duneen's smashing charge. Weaponless, he used his fists with as lethal a purpose as any gun. Schenley tried to swing the rifle, failed, and the next moment it was wrenched from his hands by Duneen. Schenley was hurt, staggered, a little dazed. But he fought with the instinctive fury of an animal. He tore at the tail of his coat, jerked a long blade from his belt, and struck surely with it. Duneen swayed, avoiding the stroke in part, and, holding the rifle low, pulled the trigger.

Schenley sagged slowly, blood coming from a big hole in his chest. Then his body gathered momentum and he crashed heavily to the ground.

Backing, Duneen reached the door. He turned. The good air of the street was on his face. Men were piling from horses, bellowing questions, thrusting at him in their excitement and frantic curiosity. He tried to fend his hurts from them. He tried to raise his voice. It suddenly broke through the tumult.

"Sheila—at the hotel!"

He was carried along in the rush that crossed the street, paced by Old Man McBain's thick Scotsman's oaths as he lumbered in the lead. And somewhere between the front door and the patio from which Juan Toledo's room opened, Clay Duneen collapsed.

There was another bed across the room. There was another man on it. He was sitting up a little, whittling at long, carefully tended nails with a heavy skinning knife. Duneen was not aware that he had made a sound until the other glanced at him.

"Ah, amigo," Juan Toledo said pleasantly, "you finish with the sleeping, yes?"

Duneen blinked at him.

"Perhaps then we have the talk?" Toledo asked. "A few matters. For instance, there has been gossip that you parted the hair of my chest with this"— he balanced the knife in his hands. "And the matter, also, of the lady who has been the nurse to the two of us—the Señorita McBain. Both things over which a man could fight . . . no?"

Duneen frowned. Then, belatedly, he saw the humor in Toledo's eyes and he grinned in answer.

"And the matter of me thinking you were a faker," he added ruefully.

Toledo chuckled. "And also the matter of your return to Corizo without waiting for the help because of a chance I might yet be alive! No, amigo, in spite of the gossip—which

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

should not worry you because one of Schenley's *ladinos* has confessed that it was Schenley himself who put the knife in me—in spite of the beautiful señorita, in spite of everything, I could not fight with you. It is better to be friends, I think!"

Duneen's grin widened. The door creaked. Sheila was there. And the Old Man. And a grinning youngster with a pallid face and keen eyes who was on crutches and moved gingerly. Mike! Clay blinked surprise. Toledo and himself must have been a long time in these beds! It was funny when a man thought of it. There was a soreness in Clay's body and a stiffness and a plaguing weakness. But that was all. There was nothing to mark how close he had come to the divide between life and death.

The Old Man came on into the room. He looked uncomfortable.

"It ain't the best time, maybe, son," he said. "But I'm takin' advantage of a time when you can't rear up and give me sass back. I ain't sayin' you was right about this deal, but I reckon I wasn't clean right, either. And I'll be almighty glad when you're back on the Bagpipe, makin' her whistle pretty!"

For a McBain, this was a wide concession. Duneen laughed at it. The Old Man backed hurriedly out, his face reddening. Mike hobbled over to grip Clay's hand for a moment. Then as Mike hobbled out again, Toledo rolled over so that his back was to Clay's bed. Only Sheila was left.

There were things Clay wanted to say. They wouldn't come out. What he finally managed went strangely with the look in Sheila's eyes.

"We got the money back?" he asked.

"Schenley had locked it up in his handbag in Arnaz' safe," she answered.

The words meant nothing to either of them. Duneen saw that. The message was in the tone. And it was what he wanted. He might never whip the Old Man into thinking his way about the conduct of the Bagpipe, but he had broken the last defense of one McBain and this was enough. He was not aware that inner thoughts were open on his face until Toledo rolled back over, cocked one brow, and spoke enviously:

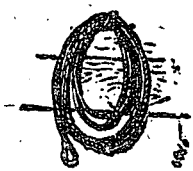
"You are a lucky man, amigo!"

THE END

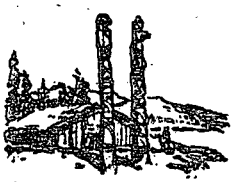
PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RANGE SAVVY

BY GENE KING



Old-time cowboys who used catch ropes of braided rawhide—the Spanish riatas—never oiled them. In breaking the ropes in, the riata was first tallowed or saddle-soaped thoroughly. The honda was then made fast to a convenient corral post, a couple of dallies taken around the saddlehorn and the horse backed away slowly from the post. As the dallies were permitted to slip around the horn the tension produced enough friction to develop sufficient heat to melt the tallow, or saddle soap, and force it into the rawhide braids. Rawhide riatas, old-timers claim, are the most accurate and fastest.



Contrary to common opinion, the skillfully carved grotesque totem poles erected by the Indians in Alaska and along the North Pacific coast had no religious significance. They were purely secular in purpose. Erected by the individual at considerable personal expense, they represented the owner's claim to fame and established his prestige and social standing. The fancier and more expensive they were, the greater the owner's prestige. Out-and-out swank on the part of important tribesmen, the actual carving of the totem poles was done by specialists, artists who were well paid for their exquisite handiwork.

The buffalo may not be returning to his old haunts in the West, but buffalo grass is. Improved strains of this once native forage are bringing the grass back to the Great Plains, where it is being increasingly utilized as a hay and pasture source. It is also being put to new uses that would have had the pioneers scratching their heads in wonderment. Modern types of buffalo grass, now that successful and economical ways of seeding have been developed, are being used in the central portion of the Plains country as a farm lawn grass, as a hardy turf suitable for recreation grounds and even for golf courses.

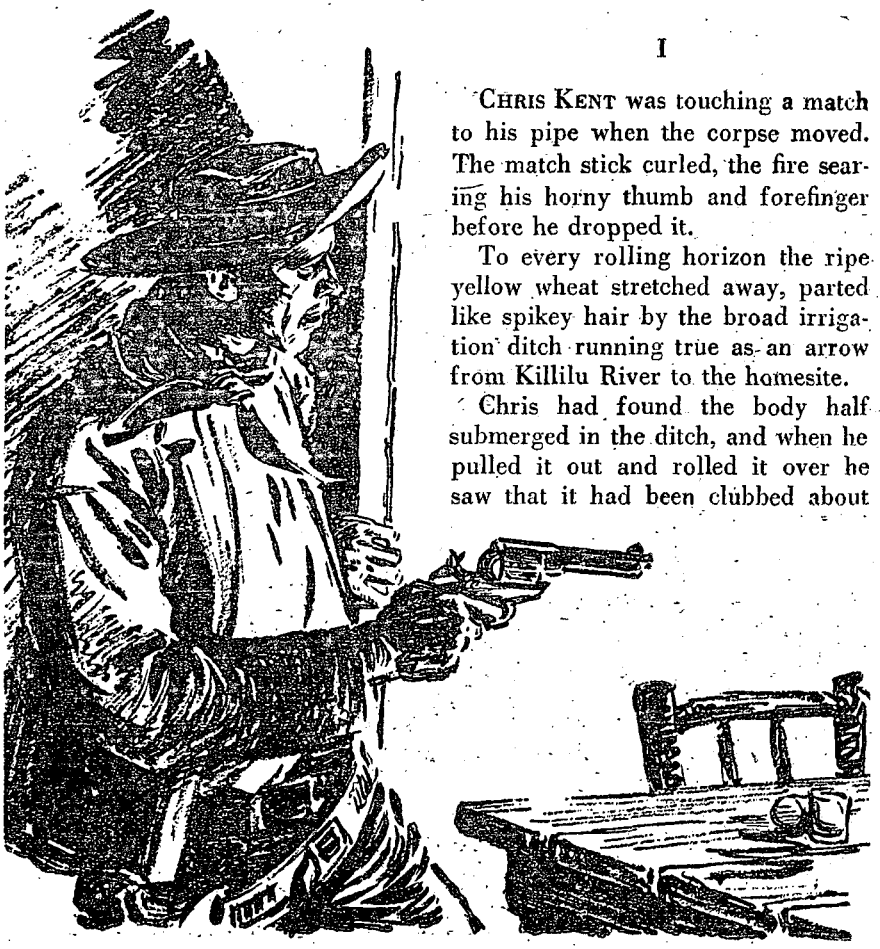
Mr. King will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Killilu Valley, with its seared wheat fields, was a powder keg ready to explode when Chris Kent decided to tackle Sid Friday's gunnies and reap a

HELLION'S HARVEST

by GIFF CHESHIRE



I

CHRIS KENT was touching a match to his pipe when the corpse moved. The match stick curled, the fire searing his horny thumb and forefinger before he dropped it.

To every rolling horizon the ripe yellow wheat stretched away, parted like spikey hair by the broad irrigation ditch running true as an arrow from Killilu River to the homesite.

Chris had found the body half submerged in the ditch, and when he pulled it out and rolled it over he saw that it had been clubbed about

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the head. It was Tom Singleton, one of the little wheat growers in Killilu Valley.

With a sudden surge of hope Chris dropped to his knees. But Tom Singleton's body was as cold to the touch as when Chris pulled it from the water. This was death—murder! The body had not moved; that had been an illusion. Reflexes. Rigor mortis was setting in.

This was well within the far-flung boundaries of Chris Kent's wheat ranch, where Singleton had had no right to be. Someone had jumped him here; there were signs of struggle. Singleton had been but one of many little growers who hated Chris Kent, and for no better reason than that he was more competent, more enterprising, and so more progressive than they. Their hatred was based on envy. Chris was certain of that.

Singleton was dead, the secret of his last fateful minutes locked within him. His murderer might have picked this site, in the middle of a vast sea of ripe wheat, with deliberate care.

Chris put away his pipe, straightening, a frown pressed deeply between his eyebrows. A childhood of

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

oppression had stunted his body, which had stopped growing short of middle height, leaving also a wizened look to his weather-browned features. This made the broad plainsman's hat he wore seem grotesque, as did the big calabash pipe he affected.

This was a jackpot, and he knew it. Killilu Valley had been a powder keg since the onset of the searing summer, which had meant that the harvest had to be acomplished in record time if the miles of wheat were to be kept from burning on the stalk.

Chris Kent had hired all the help there was to be had, transient and local. He could do this because he could pay better wages, could set better food on the table in the big central cookshack and because most men preferred his big combines, which reaped, threshed and sacked the wheat in one operation, to the cumbersome methods of his neighbors.

The upshot was that Chris stood to gain a record harvest in what would likely be a peak-price year, while his neighbors burned out in the scorching sun. Chris had not told them he would not stand by and see them ruined for he wanted them to be frightened by the prospect of it. He wanted them to come to him and beg for his help. Then he would send his combines and crews to cut their wheat. They would be saved, but only through his help. Then he would have his revenge, after long waiting, for that unhappy time so many years before. . . .

Singleton's death, on the Kent layout, was apt to upset that plan. Yet Chris knew it would be foolish to try to hide it or to change any of the seeming circumstances under which it had occurred. Chris had been making his morning tour of the big irrigation ditch when he came upon the body. He had no idea why Singleton had been on this spot or why he had died. He would send for the coroner, whose responsibility it would be to answer such questions.

Chris' preoccupation kept him from hearing the sound of approach until the handful of men bulged suddenly on the crown of excavated dirt thrown out when the ditch was built. He whirled, startled, and looked up frowning.

It was Ab Dorman, Rod Quigley, and three or four more of the little growers. They stalked down the slope, surrounding him. Their eyes fixed on the dead man at Chris' feet, then swept up to Chris' face, abruptly aghast and accusing.

Ab Dorman broke the terrible silence. He was a swarthy man, with massive shoulders supporting a thick neck and small, bullet head.

"So you've turned killer, huh, Kent?"

Chris' eyes were cold. "Don't talk like a fool! I don't know what happened to him. He was lying with his head in the ditch when I come along, ten minutes ago. You trying to insinuate I murdered him?"

Rod Quigley cut in quickly. He was an older man, with a thatch of white hair, one of the few little farmers that Chris liked and respected.

"Not murdered, Chris. But it looks like you killed him. That's a

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

harsh way of meeting Tom Singleton's threats!"

"What threats?"

Dorman snorted. "Don't play innocent, Kent! You must've heard he's been talking about torching your wheat, the first time the wind was right. It's right this morning. We figured he'd come, and we come up to stop him. Looks like you figured he'd come, too, and beat us to it. And beat him to it. You got him before he could start his fire."

"Poppycock!" Chris retorted. "I never heard anything about any threats. I've walked this ditch this time of morning for years. I come along today, and there he lay, and that's all I know about it!"

There was a serious, judicious look on Rod Quigley's face. "We tried to stop Tom, Chris. We don't want to start no war, with all our other troubles. If you caught Tom trying to torch your wheat, maybe you had a right to kill him. If so, you'd better speak out. Your denying it'll only make things worse."

"I'm not denying anything!" Chris rasped. "Look! When we were kids together you men hoorawed me for a runt! I'm still a runt, and Tom was a big man! Does it make sense I could've beat him to death?"

"You could've whacked him from behind with a club," Dorman shot back. "You could've slipped up on him. Tom was hard of hearing, you know!"

In spite of his anger, worry was crawling in Chris Kent. He had no doubt that a coroner's jury would clear him, if it came to that, but the situation might not keep that long. Few of the little farmers had Rod Quigley's fairness and caution. Some might already be looking for an excuse to erupt into violence. That would be tragedy of the worst sort, for nothing was more vulnerable than Killilu's hundreds of square miles of wheat.

Arguing at this point would only make matters worse. "I'll send for the coroner and the sheriff," Chris said. "If they think they've got a case against me, I'm ready to stand trial. I'm going, now. You men can stay here if you want until the sheriff comes. But I wouldn't touch anything or try to change the look of things."

No one tried to stop him. Chris moved with his customary cool, confident stride, disappearing down the slow fall of land.

Topping a distant rise, Chris could see the three big combines at work far below, each powered by a ten-team string of horses, the rigs pulling one behind the other in a staggered procession that accomplished the entire harvest. It was a sight that always thrilled him, and in spite of his new worry, it moved him now.

This was the culmination of years of obsession, the payoff harvest. Season after season he had turned his profits back into more land and machinery, to satisfy his burning ambition to become the biggest rancher in Killilu. He was there now, or on the brink of it for, up to two hours ago at least, he had had the rest of the valley where he wanted it. Chris stood there a long moment, fill-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing his being with the sight of it, then he hurried on down to the homesite.

Like everything else Chris Kent had built, this had been developed on a massive scale, the huge ranchhouse, the cookshack for the crew and the bunkhouses, the barns and granaries and sheds. Chris stopped in his small office long enough to pen a note to the sheriff, then found a hand and despatched him with it to town.

He had barely accomplished this when hoof beats thundered into the yard, and Chris rounded a corner to see a pie-faced gelding come to a ball-footed stop. It was ridden by a girl, a wisp of a girl with a mop of flaming red hair and a strip of freckles across her pert nose.

Ginger Dykstra stared at him. "You look like a hornet. Go ahead and buzz."

Chris grinned. She was about the only person in Killilu who had not come, in recent years, to stand a little in awe of him. But Ginger Dykstra stood in awe of no one.

"Tom Singleton's been killed," he said. "Up on the irrigation ditch—on my land. Hell's going to break loose. I've sent for the sheriff."

The girl's eyes held his for a long moment, consternation growing there. "Oh, Chris. That's one reason I came over to see you. Some of 'em are talking wild. Ab Dorman keeps egging 'em on. Chris, you've got to release men enough to let them harvest!"

"I have, like blazes!" His eyes turned cold and determined.

The girl dismounted. She was small enough so that Chris had to look down into her eyes. Perhaps that was why he had always liked her, even long ago. Ginger was the only daughter of Fred Dykstra, another small grower, but up until lately that had made no difference.

"Oh, Chris! Won't you ever forgive them?"

"Ten years ago," Chris returned adamantly, "I told you that some day they'd come to me begging for help. This is it."

The girl's eyes softened. "I know. You have every reason to hate them. Nothing can be crueler than a bunch of kids—school kids. They kept teasing you until you were beside yourself because you were a . . . runt. Ab Dorman was the bully. And you were afraid of 'em until I told you to stand up and fight. Then you did. But they were too big for you, too many for you. You couldn't lick 'em, but you kept trying. I was your only friend. You told me that some day you'd get even. And this is it. But, Chris, it's ugly. It isn't like we thought it'd be!"

"It's like I thought it'd be!" Chris returned, with satisfaction. "It's even better!"

Ginger's gaze fixed on the pipe he was filling, the big calabash. "Yes, the weather played into your hands. But, Chris, none of us are kids any longer. You're grown. They're grown, and some of them are married and have kids of their own. It'll go hard with a lot of innocent people if you break them. Can't you forget it?"

After a long moment the man answered. "No. Not until I 've had

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my due. None of 'em, excepting your dad and Rod Quigley and a few older ones has ever showed me any friendship. Why should I go soft now?"

"They're envious, for one thing! They struggle with their two-bit set-ups, while you make money and grow by leaps and bounds. You see, they aren't driven by a single idea, like you, Chris! They resent your being sucessful while they fail, and that's part of your revenge. You've never given them a chance to drop the old attitude. So they belittle you out of rancor. It makes them feel better! You're forgetting you might not get a chance to humble them if a war starts! You'll take yourself down, too!"

II

Chris smiled a little. "If it's your dad you're worried about, honey, I've already told him I'll see that he gets harvested."

A flush spread over Ginger Dykstra's cheeks. "Yes. And he sent me to tell you just what I figured he would. He says he'll take his chances with his *real* neighbors!"

That stung Chris worse than he was ready to let her see. He laughed harshly. "What I haven't told you is that I don't intend to see any of 'em go broke. I'll harvest for 'em, all right—when they ask me to!"

"Which they probably never will!"

Chris shrugged. "Then it'll be their own fault."

He saw that he had angered her. Suddenly she was taking off her glove. Chris' heart leaped into his throat, but he could not bring himself to stop her. Then she was working the ring from her finger. He had placed it there, three months earlier, the night of the dance down in the schoolhouse.

Ginger held it out to him, but he refused to accept it. She placed it on top of a fence post and, whirling, swung up into the saddle.

"I guess it's partly my own fault, Chris. I taught you to fight. I guess I taught you better than I knew!"

At her touch the gelding shot into motion.

For a long while Chris stared at the dust cloud she made. More than anyone else in Killilu she had always known how it was with him. Yet he saw now that even she could not have known just how hellish were the years of his youth.

Chris Kent could not remember when his parents had brought him to Killilu Valley, but he had never forgotten the poverty. Neither of his parents had been fitted for farming, and the natural problems confronting a homesteader on frontier land had been too much for Jake Kent.

Proud and proddy and goaded by his failures, Jake Kent had never got on well with his neighbors. And the animosities of the fathers had been taken up by the offspring. At school in winter and in the long, lonely summers, young Chris had been made to suffer severely. Not only was he a misfit, but a runt—starved into runtiness by a father who was a failure. Only Jake's iron-handed discipline kept him in school at all.

Then, at eighteen, when a winter epidemic took both parents, young

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Chris found himself in sole possession of the Kent land. For several years wheat talk had been going around the valley, then suddenly it took on. Where formerly the settlers had counted themselves lucky to break even at diversified ranching, wheat abruptly promised to become a gold mine.

Chris discovered gradually that the dry and barren Kent land had turned from liability to asset, for it was the best wheat-growing soil in the valley. It was then that his obsession took definite shape. He had started with a few acres, now he had this.

He was supreme in Killilu Valley but he admitted, as he watched the dust of the gelding's heels, there went his last friend.

They were his enemies, now as they had always been. They were bent on destroying him. Well, let them do their worst. He would get on with his harvest.

In a couple of hours the coroner pulled in, with Sheriff Si Crawford jogging along beside the hack on his flea-bitten roan. Chris told them how to reach the spot where Tom Singleton's body lay, but did not accompany them there. It was better than an hour before the two officals returned, with Singleton's body in the hack.

"You go on in, Virge," Si Crawford told the coroner. "I'll chew the fat with Kent a minute and ketch up with you."

Chris invited the sheriff into the office and poured him a drink. Crawford held the glass in his hand, staring at it, shaking his head.

"This looks bad, Chris. The wust thing that ever hit Killilu."

"You think I done it?"

"Nope. Certain you didn't. Some of Tom's friends was waiting up there with the body, and I told 'em that plain. Reckon I didn't convince 'em."

"Then arrest me, and I'll stand trial. If the court lets me off, they won't have any more argument."

"Nope. Ain't even enough evidence against you to warrant it. A man's got to have a motive to do a killin'. Even from what they claim, you couldn't have premeditated it. If you'd caught Tom trying to fire your wheat, like they claim, and had to kill him to stop him, you'd be smart enough to admit it and stand on your rights. Whether you killed him or not ain't the point, son. If I read the sign right, the biggest and stinkingest whizzer a man could imagine's about to be run on Killilu!"

"What do you mean?"

"Unless you do somethin' blamed fast, son, this valley's going to explode in a war that'll split heaven open! There's men ready to turn natural dissensions to their own advantage. Son, who stands to profit if Killilu runs hog wild and destroys its crops?"

"Nobody. It'd mean ruin for the whole shebang."

"You're wrong there, boy." The old sheriff grinned thinly. "There's somebody it'd set up pretty. I ain't going to say more than that, for it ain't my business to make charges before I'm set to prove 'em. But I'm asking you to do me a favor. Make

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

peace with your neighbors! Today! Now!"

The sheriff refused to discuss the matter further, finished his drink and rode away.

He left Chris puzzled. Relieved that the law was not going to take sides against him, too, Chris was nonetheless uneasy about the deeper, bigger trouble Crawford had hinted at but refused to explain.

The three big combines worked through the last hours of daylight before they pulled into the big yard at the homesite to be serviced for the next day's operations. The tired, hungry crews washed up and dashed for the cookshack for a belated supper. Chris tallied the sacked wheat that had been hauled in and stacked that day, but strangely he took little satisfaction in it, though the per-acre yield was running higher than his most optimistic estimates.

His truculence spread to include Si Crawford. It looked as though the sheriff was trying to mystify and scare him simply to get him to give in to the small ranchers. This Chris was determined he would never do, not until they came to him to beg for his help in saving their outfits.

Right after supper Chris called Pete Krenick, his straw boss, and four more of his regular crew into the office.

"I reckon you boys know what's shaped up today. There may be trouble tonight. You ready to side me?"

"You bet, Chris!"

Chris grinned. "I know it's tough on you, after sweatin' all day in the fields, but we got to mount the best guard we can. I figure the six of us'll have to saddle up and ride the boundaries until daylight. Armed. Set to shoot the first shy-poke we catch on our side of the line. That askin' too much?"

The men shook their heads, and Chris was satisfied. He treated his help fairly, paid, fed and sheltered them well, and it was returning dividends now. He gave them detailed instructions and watched them file out.

The hours until midnight passed so peacefully that under any other circumstances Chris would have given way to the spell of the warm, starry, wheat-scented night and rejoiced in it. His riders circled the confines of the huge ranch continual-

THE OLD-TIMER SAYS:

How'd yuh like to run out o' ca'tridges just when yuh got yore sights on a rattler? Our boys need plenty ammunition now that they're closin' in on them yeller bellies, so let's back 'em up by buyin'

EXTRA WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ly, yet the sense of menace in Chris mounted with each passing minute. It would be dead easy for the required man, carrying one necessary match, to slip through this loose guard and set a fire on the windward side of the vast stretch of wheat.

Chris had circled the ranch twice, and was halted momentarily on Squirrel Ridge when he got his first glimpse of flame. He raised in the stirrups, eyes staring. As he watched, yellow and rose flames leaped upward. It took a moment for him to get his bearings, then he lashed his horse savagely into motion.

That was on the windward side, but not where he had expected it. It looked as though it was down on the homesite!

The horse sloped out in a fast run. Chris cut directly across the wheat fields to save time. Within a few minutes he came out on the lane that led into the ranchhouse from the road. The fire was burning brightly there, lighting the sky.

He saw a group of riders surging toward him. Wheeling his mount into the brush, Chris slipped his gun from its holster. As the riders broke over the brow of the hill, just below him, he saw that they were all masked men. But the rider in the lead, highlighted for an instant against the glow in the background, was a man with huge shoulders and a bullet-shaped head. Ab Dorman. The little farmers had struck!

Chris wheeled from the brush, his six-gun lining down. But he held his fire. He did not know whom all those masks hooded. Ginger Dykstra's father might be among them, even Ginger herself, for she was spunky enough to take part now that her anger had been aroused. Chris wanted to know whose blood he was letting before he resorted to gunfire.

Whirling his mount, Chris raced toward the homesite. From the distance of about two hundred yards he could see enough to tear a groan from his lips. The new combines were burning.

Chris plunged into the yard, throwing himself from his horse before it was stopped. A bucket brigade had already formed from the watering trough, but he saw at a glance that the fight the hands were putting up was hopeless. The combines were choked with chaff and were blazing inside like furnaces.

One of the hands recognized Chris and raced up. "Me'n Limpy bedded down close by, like you said!" he yelled defensively. "But a pair of galoots slipped in and jumped us afore we was awake!"

Chris dismissed him with a wave of the hand. It didn't matter, now. He had expected the attack to be made on the wheat, had taken only moderate precautions here, assuming the night riders would not risk rousing a bunkhouse full of tough hands.

His lips twisted into a bitter smile. He had slapped a big crop loan on his harvest to buy those combines. Without them he could not harvest the crop to pay off Sid Friday's loan. Ab Dorman and his bunch had accomplished much with their strike.

Chris was aware that even yet Dorman might try to burn the wheat, to

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wipe him out completely, but the crop was worthless unless he could harvest it, so that mattered little.

One by one, the hands gave up the fight and formed a hard-faced, sympathetic circle around him. Then one of them was growling: "By criminy, I say we don't take this layin' down. Let's return them mangy sons their visit!"

Faces turned toward Chris questioningly. He nodded slowly. "I reckon you called the tune, men! Let's go!" He was sorry he had held fire back there on the lane.

Horses were saddled quickly, and more firearms emerged from warbags. Within fifteen minutes a dozen bleak-faced riders were pounding along the county road.

Riding in the lead was Chris Kent, the bitter smile still playing on his lips.

III

Yet a new perplexity had formed in Chris' mind, a feeling of doom that was not directly related to the project he had embarked upon. His thoughts kept ranging ahead to eventualities beyond this night's. If he could not pay off the crop loan, the Wheatland Grangers' Bank would probably sue to recover. Sid Friday would secure a judgment against him. Chris could not satisfy that judgment.

That was the trouble with wheat. A man either made it big, or he was left flat broke if his luck went sour. Chris had long put his profits back into the ranch. So his place could be sold at a sheriff's sale to satisfy the judgment Sid Friday, owner-manager of the Wheatland Bank, stood to hold against him.

With sudden staggering impact, Chris understood what Sheriff Si Crawford had hinted at but had not dared to speak out about. Sid Friday held the paper of every man-jack wheat farmer in Killilu! A cold-faced, unfriendly man who lived solely for business, Friday had always seemed a faithful and necessary part of Killilu. He seemed to believe in its future, had always advanced money readily enough to any reliable wheatman who asked for it.

With a sudden thrill of excitement, Chris realized that perhaps he was not the only one for whom this scorching harvest season had held opportunity. What would Sid Friday care about one year's harvest? If it could be destroyed through a valley war, he stood a good chance of coming into possession of the entire valley, land, buildings, equipment.

Chris was certain that Sheriff Crawford had meant Sid Friday when he spoke darkly of someone who stood to profit by the war, of someone ready and eager to exploit Killilu's natural dissensions.

Ab Dorman could be working for Friday. Ginger had mentioned that it was Dorman who was trying to egg the small ranchers into an attack against Chris Kent. Dorman, whose ranch joined Chris', could have killed Tom Singleton and left his body in the ditch, then later led the other small farmers to "surprise" Chris there. He could have whipped them into the attack on the combines,

PRODUCED BY UNE.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

knowing it would bring reprisal and touch off the war.

Chris held up an arm, bringing the lancing bunch to a swift halt. They had come within an inch of falling into that trap, if such it was. At this very moment Ab Dorman could be riding to torch the little farmers' wheat himself to make certain the plan did not fail.

For a moment Chris was tempted to shrug his shoulders and let come what may. He had been ruined, whether or not Sid Friday was behind the scheme, and why shouldn't they be? Why should they come off easy, to laugh at him?

Chris Kent realized then that he had never wanted to injure his neighbors, but only to humble them for the indignities they had inflicted on him in his boyhood and to make them come to him for help he never would have refused.

They had stopped close to the lane leading in to Fred Dykstra's. Abruptly Chris said, "You men wait here. I'm riding in for a powwow with Fred." He gigged the horse and started up the lane before anyone could protest. Primarily he wanted to know how many of the little farmers Ab Dorman had with him and who they were. He had a sudden suspicion that Dorman might be using a crew of imported hardcases, and Fred and Ginger could help him find out. If so, it would prove that Si Crawford's suspicions were solidly based.

Chris hailed the house a couple of times before Fred Dykstra's sleepy voice answered. "Who is it."

"Chris Kent, Fred. I've gotta talk to you."

"Come on in."

When Fred Dykstra rubbed sleep from his eyes presently, by the light of a kerosene lamp, Chris knew that he had had no part in the raiding party. Then Ginger joined them, wrapped in a Mother Hubbard, her eyes anxious.

"Somebody burned my combines, Fred," Chris told Dykstra, his eyes avoiding Ginger. "You know anything about it?"

The blood drained out of Dykstra's cheeks. "Burned 'em? There must be some mistake!"

Chris laughed harshly. "There's no mistake. They're ruined . . . and so am I!"

Fred Dykstra looked away for a long moment. When he turned his eyes back to Chris, they were genuinely disturbed. "Chris, we had a meeting, tonight. Ab Dorman brought up that proposition. But it was voted down. So help me. How many was there?"

With a shrug of the shoulders, Chris answered. "Six-seven. All masked riders."

"So-o-o-!" Dykstra breathed. "Chris, there ain't that many men in Killilu'd ride on a masked hooligan party. They're mostly honest men, no matter what you think of 'em. Ab Dorman'd go for that kind of trick, and maybe so two-three others. But not that many!"

The man was obviously telling the truth as he saw it, and it convinced Chris that his new suspicions were well-founded. He told the Dykstras about them quickly.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh, you're right, Chris!" Ginger said. "I know you're right! Ab Dorman's worked hard to keep the little ranchers aroused against you. He's the one that keeps talking up violence. Sid Friday's the kind of a man who'd rig a scheme like that! And Ab Dorman's the kind of a man who'd hire out in it for enough money!"

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" Fred Dykstra whistled. "If Dorman's leading a bunch of hardcases and meaning to wipe the little ranchers out next, what can we do to stop him?"

"That," Chris returned, "is the question. He may hold off for a few hours to see if I'm going to play the fool and do his work for him. We'll have to have that break or we're sunk. Meanwhile, get your britches on, Fred; we've got to collect the wheatmen and stop Dorman. I've already got a good-sized bunch waiting out in the road."

Fred Dykstra flowed into incisive action. "Ab Dorman'd hole up at his own place to wait, if he's got a hooligan bunch to hide!" he yelled from another room, where he was dressing. "Maybeso we can ketch 'em there!"

Chris did not answer. A cold feeling clung to his spine. Ab Dorman did not require numbers. One man, picking his spot correctly, could torch a flame that would sweep through Killilu in a giant conflagration.

He noticed that Ginger was watching him curiously. Her eyes had softened somewhat, and there was the ghost of a smile on her lips.

"I like you for this, Chris!"

"For what?" The question was almost a growl, to cover his own sudden upsurge of feeling.

"You've hated these people for years, but in a showdown, you're a real neighbor."

"If Killilu's going to burn!" Chris shot back, "I don't want the blame for it!"

"Look, Chris! For once you've got to be guided by your head instead of your feelings! Why'd anyone blame you? So far you've been top dog in Killilu. Why would you suddenly decide to burn out the little growers?"

"It'd look like I figured they'd burned my combines!" Chris answered.

"But the little growers'd know they didn't. They'd get to wondering. And somebody else's smart enough to foresee that!"

The tobacco Chris was rolling into brown paper spilled suddenly. "Holy smoke! You're right! Sid Friday's got to play it so his own hide's safe, no matter how it turns out. He's got to fix the responsibility on me in such a way there'll be no mere guess work!"

"Exactly. And I'll bet a cookie I can call his next play!"

Fred Dykstra returned to the room, buckling his gun belt about him, and looked at his daughter with interest.

"So far he's baited only *you*," Ginger continued. "He's still got to bait the little growers in a way that'll leave no doubt in their minds. For

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one thing they probably won't burn you out. That's why Friday and Dorman picked tonight. The wind's right. And you're to the windward of the little growers."

"Which means the fire'd start on Squirrel Ridge!" Chris put in. "And that narrows our problem down plenty! We've got to get men on Squirrel Ridge and quick!"

"I reckon you're right, honey!" Fred Dykstra said, looking at his daughter intently. "If we've only got time to do it!"

Chris whirled to Dykstra. "That'll be your job, Fred! Rouse every hand you can get and head for Squirrel Ridge. Have somebody take a wagon with water barrels and gunny sacks. Round up Dorman's toughs if you can. But if they get their fire set, you'll still have a chance to backfire from across the gully and save the bulk of Killilu!"

Fred Dykstra was gone like a shot. Ginger whirled toward a bedroom. "Wait for me, Chris! I'm going with you!"

"You're staying here!" Chris growled. "What I'm heading into is dangerous!"

"Fiddlesticks!"

Chris knew there was no stopping her. While he waited, his mind eagerly plumbed the various angles of his sudden plan. He had a hunch he knew what Ab Dorman would do before he torched the wheat. He meant to nip that plan in the bud if he could.

Ten minutes later he and Ginger were churning the dust along the road, heading in the direction of Ab Dorman's ranch.

From the distance, as they pounded over a low rise, Dorman's sprawling ranchhouse appeared to be dark, with the bachelor occupant and his hired hands long since bedded down for the night. Then, as he examined it from afar, Chris caught a glint of light slitting between a drawn blind and the window frame.

"They're up!" he told Ginger, in a whisper. "I'm going on in afoot. You wait here with the horses. You can help me best by keeping things clear for a fast getaway, if we need one. Which we likely will."

The girl consented, much to Chris' relief. He swung to the ground and struck off toward the house. Five minutes later he was certain that there were several men inside the house, for he found half a dozen mounts waiting behind the barn, saddled and ground-tied, ready for sudden work. A dozen steps farther, around the corner of the barn, he halted in his tracks, breath escaping soundlessly from whistle-puckered lips.

Two of his own saddle horses stood there.

"It's like I figured," he told himself. "Dorman's picked up some of my men." These would be two of the men Chris had put on guard, much earlier that night, to ride the boundaries. And whether they knew it or not, their lives were in grave jeopardy.

Chris skulked through the deep shadows of the barnyard, coming up on the woodshed from the back.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There he waited a long moment, his ears straining, but he heard no warning sound. Presently he moved on again.

Snug behind a carefully evolved scheme, Ab Dorman had posted no guard here. Chris gained the back porch, and moved across it soundlessly, dreading a creaking floor board. None betrayed him. He placed his hand on the knob of the kitchen door, his six-gun firmly gripped in the other fist, then turned the knob and flung the door open.

This proved a needless precaution, for no one awaited him in the murky depths of the kitchen. He heard the drone of voices from an adjoining room, and as the door banged at the end of its violent swing, he spurted across the room. He was framed in the doorway, gun steadily in hand, before the eight men he saw inside had completely turned to investigate the sudden racket.

"Easy, gents!" Chris advised. "I'll plug the first man that moves an inch farther!"

IV

Ab Dorman bulked larger than any of the other men grouped around the table. There were a couple of whiskey bottles in evidence and some scattered cards, and the room reeked with tobacco smoke. Across from Dorman sat a mild-looking, flabby-featured man in a string tie and black business suit. Chris eyed him coldly.

"Well, Friday, I sort o' figured I'd find you here!"

Aside from Dorman and Friday there were no other Killilu Valley men in the room. The rest were all tough-looking plug uglies, scum Dorman had picked up somewhere for his purpose. Chris' eyes flicked on around the room.

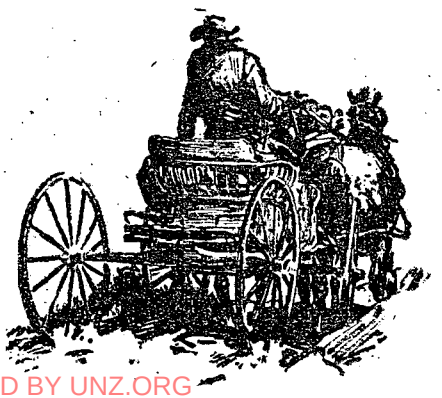
Jack Adler and Wert Byerson, his own men, sat in the corner farthest from the door, their legs stretched out on the floor and their backs propped against the wall, each securely bound and gagged. Chris saw the light of sudden hope flicker in their eyes, but he dared not look at them for long.

Ab Dorman had come halfway to his feet. He settled slowly into his chair again, the initial surprise in his eyes giving way to cold anger. There seemed to be no expression in Sid Friday's face, but the look he sped Dorman was deadly.

"You damned fool! I told you to post a guard!"

"Keep your shirt on!" Dorman growled. "This is a break!"

Chris Kent knew he faced the toughest situation of his life. He knew that Adler and Byerson had been marked for death, that he himself bore that mark suddenly.



PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sid Friday's gray countenance took on the momentary animation of a cold grin. "Kent's holding the gun," he reminded.

In self-defense, Dorman growled: "That little bantam ain't scaring me none! He's played into our hands. When we fire Squirrel Ridge we couldn't ask anything better to leave there than the plugged body of Chris Kent!"

"Friday's right, in that respect!" Chris cut in hotly. "I got the edge, and I'm taking these two men of mine! I see your scheme, all right! After you'd fired the ridge, you meant to leave their bodies there. You could claim you was expectin' foul play, caught 'em in the act and plugged 'em. That'd persuade the little growers I wiped 'em out. That'd cover your tracks permanent. Only, you ain't going to get away with it!"

"Ain't much you can do about it, Kent!" Ab Dorman shot back. "You're going to be layin' there with 'em!"

Dorman moved then in the play that Chris had been dreading, massive shoulders hunched on either side of the bullet head. A hairy hand stabbed gunward, forcing Chris to swerve his own six-gun, and trigger.

The slug crashed into the wall behind Dorman, feet wide of the target, for the hard-cases nearest Chris lowered shoulders and charged him. Chris whipped wildly with the gun, felt the crunch of metal on solid flesh, heard a body thump on the floor. He pitched a shot at the kerosene lamp, trying to shatter it, missed this, also.

He had been aware from the moment he entered Dorman's house that it would be like this. When he set out from Fred Dykstra's place he had not expected to find so many of them here, hoping merely to surprise the king pins. Then, when he discovered the peril of his two hired men, his hand had been forced. He had hoped at first to free them and get away. Now there was nothing left but a fight to the finish.

Wrenching free from clutching hands, Chris whirled through the doorway, gaining momentary advantage in the obscurity of an adjoining room. His gun exploded twice, each shot bringing down a man framing himself in the doorway in pursuit. That discouraged the rest.

This was only temporary respite. Some of them could go out through the other door, circle the shack, and come at him from the other direction. He would be between two fires. There was only the dim chance that when Ginger heard the shooting she would beat a fast trail to Squirrel Ridge after her father and the others. There wasn't the slightest hope that Chris could hold out that long.

Chris was calm now, his mind working with deadly precision. There would be Dorman and Friday and two pugs left. All obsessed with the will to kill now, for they would not dare let Chris or Adler or Byerson get away alive. Chris decided that his only chance was in a play for time.

The worry pressing heaviest on Chris' mind was the fate of Adler

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and Byerson. Dorman might decide to plug them now to insure their keeping out of the fight.

"Dorman! Friday!" Chris called. "Don't add more murders to your crimes! The little growers know you two're behind tonight's work! I told 'em so, myself. Your trick ain't going to work. If you're smart, you'll get out with no more to answer for than you've got already! They'll be showing here, pretty soon, to see what's happened to me!"

He heard a low curse and knew he had landed a Sunday punch. Gun in hand, every sense alerted, he waited. There were inaudible whispers, then in a couple of minutes he heard a far door open and the sound of footsteps as somebody went outside.

Then another voice answered, a strange voice belonging to one of the hired killers.

"You better give up, Kent, your goose is cooked. Dorman and Friday've gone to torch the wheat. When the little growers see that, they won't be riding this way to help you! They hate you, and they'll go a-foggin' to try and save their precious wheat! We've got you—"

"Oh, no, you haven't! You coyotes'd better reach fast!"

Chris' pulses leaped.— That was Ginger's voice. Disdaining caution, Chris surged through the door, six-gun ready.

Ginger had pushed back the blind and stood framed in the open window, a small pistol tightly gripped in her sturdy little hand and dangerous portent blazing in her eyes.

The two hard cases hung in indecision. They had been left by Friday and Dorman to do the dirty work. A burly, whiskered man closest to Ginger started his hands upward hesitantly. It was the rat-faced individual across the room who chose to challenge the issue. His hand stabbed gunward.

"Down, Ginger!" Chris yelped.

His own gun lined down, then it was spewing scarlet flame. Ratface let his gun go with a clatter, his thin claws clutching suddenly at his emaciated chest. The burly man slid across the room, trying to spot himself in front of the two trussed men to arrest Chris' hand. Ginger Dykstra had been wise enough to throw herself free of the window when the shooting started. The burly individual triggered as he moved, and Chris felt the sear of pain along the ribs on the left side of his chest.

He took it, steeling himself to deliberate aim before he let go the shot that brought the gunman down with a crash, almost on top of the trussed men.

Ginger was already scrambling through the window, and she removed the gag and tie rope from Byerson while Chris freed Adler.

"They took us like sittin' ducks!" Byerson said, with a sheepish grin. "When Jack and me saw the fire down at the homesite we took off in that direction. We run smack into the whole pack of 'em!" He rolled a long delayed smoke. "What'd they burn?"

"The combines. And Dorman and Friday'll burn out Killilu if we don't

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stop 'em!" Chris explained.

Presently four riders were flogging along the road that led toward Chris' own ranch. At the bottom of the gully they turned into the wheat fields, cutting straight toward Squirrel Ridge. At the top of the next rise they stopped for a moment with a concerted groan.

Far away the first light of dawn was brightening the horizon. Framed against it was a menacing arc of scarlet. The fire had been set.

Chris gigged his horse, with no thought now but to get there, with the others plunging behind him. The flames livened as they drew nearer, and occasionally they could see the body of a man silhouetted against them, a man flailing with all his might with a wet gunny sack.

The wagon with the water barrels had been drawn up. Fred Dykstra saw them coming and rode toward them.

"We got 'em, but too late. Dorman's dead, and Friday's tied up—to stretch hemp if we don't get this blaze out!"

"We can't bank on that!" Chris responded. "We'll backfire from across the gully!"

Few men in Killilu ever remembered the exact details of the hours that followed. Hours in which the sinister conflagration, surging through the overripe wheat as though it was wadded paper, spread into a vast lake. The backfire, growing to the same proportions, was kept down on the leeward side by desperate men working in a frenzy with wet burlap. On the other side it ate its way against the breeze, creeping slowly, tortuously burning a swath too wide for the big fire to cross when once the two flowed together. Dawn came, and the morning sun was brightening before they knew for sure that Killilu, in the main, was safe.

When the frustrated red ruin had burned itself to smoldering stubble, two dozen bone-weary but elated men formed a circle around Chris Kent at the water wagon. Chris looked at them, once his schoolmates and now his neighbors, and for the first time in years he gave them a grin of whole-hearted friendship.

His gaze hardened as it swept to Sid Friday and Ab Dorman, who were tied to the wheels of the unhitched wagon.

"You played a bigger fool's part even than I did, Friday. You had a honorable place in Killilu and you were prospering. But you weren't content with that. So you turned crooked. You turned into a murderer."

"I never killed anybody!" Friday growled.

"Then who killed Tom Singleton!"

"Dorman!"

Ab Dorman strained against his bonds, his eyes glowing in fury. "Why, you yellow-bellied, double-crosser!"

Sid Friday faced the burning necessity of mitigating the charges he knew would be brought against him. "Dorman cooked up and carried out that killing!" he panted. "He planned the others that didn't come off! My deal with him was that he

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was to start trouble and get everybody burned out. He made the plans! I never condoned killing!"

"But you probably would have if your scheme had worked!" Chris retorted. He turned back to his neighbors. "Well, we've lost some wheat. I've lost my combines and I'll probably lose my crop. But I can't say I'm sorry about that!"

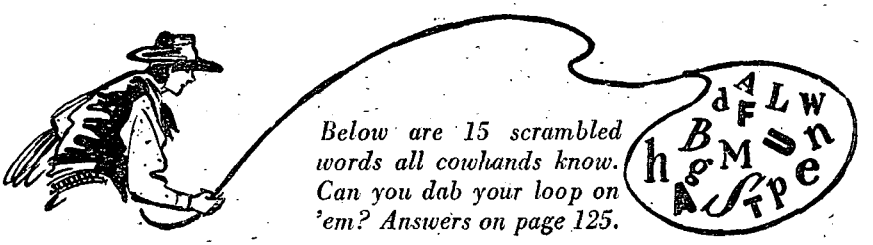
Rod Quigley met his smile with an even broader one.

"We've all gained, in spite of these two coyotes, Chris. There's still a lot of binders in Killilu. And you've got the hands. We'll get in the harvest. All of it. Yours, too. And I reckon we've all learned a good lesson. It's important a community should stick together. I say we form us an association, right here. Our first job'll be to get in the harvest. Later there'll be new combines, with plenty of help for everybody. And I'm nominating Chris Kent to be our business manager! With his brains and all our muscle, Killilu Valley can grow fat and sassy!" A yell of approval followed.

A choked feeling came over Chris. And he was seeing in their eyes that a man's stature was not in bone and muscle but in the work of his hands. That was in Ginger's eyes, too, as she stood soot-stained and weary, but smiling. He knew that in Killilu's sight he was no longer a runt. But he couldn't tell them how good that made him feel. These were all farmers, rough and tough men ashamed of sentiment, and he was one of them.

"Thanks, friends!" he answered. He waved a hand toward the miles of yellow grain. "It's a deal! Go home and eat your breakfasts, then oil up them binders! The crop's waiting and we've all got to pitch in!"

THE END



1. nud
2. anksh
3. vilan
4. derocabus
5. knafl
6. rethal
7. moovase
8. nora
9. agest
10. ticusib
11. regdab
12. ownshaked
13. toohlow
14. dranb
15. wholerate

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A GHOST IS BURIED

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

The Chinquapin Kid kept returning to plague Dan Rollins—who couldn't fight back with the only weapon they both understood

THE greatest moment in Dan Rollins' life was that moment in which he stood over the cradle and looked down at the tiny, red-bodied, bald-headed son born but two hours before. To most men this matter of being a father was the most natural event in the world. To Dan Rollins it was inconceivable. The last year had been inconceivable. Twelve

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

months before no one knew him as Dan Rollins. He'd been the Chinquapin Kid, a trigger-tripping gunslick who hired his sixes to anyone who would pay the wages. Now the Chinquapin Kid was dead, and his death had been a miracle.

Rollins thought back over the years, powder-smoking, death-dealing years, and the restlessness that had been in him, of his drifting from one range war to another. There had been no particular fear in him during those years. He didn't know anything about death. He didn't think about it. He'd seen too many men die. It had become a casual, commonplace thing. That had been the Chinquapin Kid. Now, as Dan Rollins, life was something else. He'd stood beside his wife's bedside as she'd gone down into the shadow, and come again into the sunlight. During those hours the last vestige of the man known as the Chinquapin Kid had gone.

Dan Rollins would never understand fully what had happened. The understanding was not important. It was enough that it had happened. He thought back to that day more than a year ago when it had begun.

It was the windup of a range war, and the fight had been carried into a little Nevada town. The Chinquapin Kid's outfit had wiped out its enemies except one man. That man was cornered before he could make his getaway, and the Kid had shot it out with him in the schoolyard. The Kid hadn't even seen where he was until the fight was over and he stood, a smoking gun in his hand, looking down at the fallen man.

"Why did you kill him?"

Then the Kid saw the girl in the doorway of the schoolhouse. She was no ordinary girl. She was tall and lithe, her hair chestnut and brightly tinted by the late afternoon sun, her eyes dark blue and filled with scorn. The Kid snatched off his Stetson, and held it awkwardly. Slowly he slipped his gun back into leather. For the first time in his life a deep shame was in him.

"I asked you why you killed him?"

There was no fear on the girl's face. With most women there would have been. So the Kid stood, his eyes downcast before her, feeling utterly ashamed and useless. He could make no answer to her question. The redhead had been killed for no better reason than the fact that the Chinquapin Kid had been paid to do it.

Then, seeing that the Kid would not answer, the girl asked hotly: "Did it ever occur to you that if you'd done that half an hour sooner, there would have been children here?"

Again the Kid could make no answer. He did not move until the girl turned back into the schoolhouse, and slammed the door. Later, while the rest of the crew drank to their victory, the Kid stood motionless, thinking of the redhead he had killed, of the questions the girl had asked, but most of all thinking of the girl herself.

That night the Kid got his time, and rode away, but no matter how far or how fast he rode the picture of the scornful girl standing in the doorway of the schoolhouse was never out of his mind. So he came

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back to the Nevada town, and took a riding job with an outfit a few miles to the north. He asked about the schoolteacher.

"Her name's Sharon Cowan," he was told. "She lives alone in a white house north of town."

That Saturday night the Kid knocked on the door of Sharon's house. When she opened it he said: "There's a dance tonight in the lodge hall. I'd like to take you."

She knew him. He saw that, and he saw, too, the strange expression in her eyes when she discovered he wore no guns.

"So the Chinquapin Kid rides back without his guns," she said softly. "I thought a gunman never changed."

"One did," the Kid answered. "You changed him. They call me Dan Rollins now."

Sharon went to the dance with Dan Rollins. Through the winter and spring she went to more dances; she went riding with him, and when school was out she married him. Tongues wagged in that Nevada town. Horrified housewives looked askance. Respectable men shook their heads, and said there was no understanding a woman when she went out of her head for a man.

Dan Rollins himself didn't know the answer. Perhaps Sharon didn't, either. Perhaps there was no answer at all. It was enough for Rollins that Sharon loved him, and knowing that he loved her seemed to satisfy this girl who could have had her choice of a dozen men. They didn't stay in Nevada. Too many knew the record of the Chinquapin Kid. They came north and bought the Rocking Chair in the foothills of the Cascades. There the neighbors took Dan Rollins for Dan Rollins, and nothing more.

The first evening in their cabin, with the lamplight upon her chestnut hair, Sharon opened Dan's valise, and took from it his gun belts and guns. She stood for a time holding them, looking at them and Dan knew she was looking back over the bloody trail of the Chinquapin Kid.

"I'll throw those away," Dan said roughly. "I'll never wear them again."

"No," Sharon said, and put them back. She came to Dan and kissed him. "It's not what you were, Dan. It's what you are and what you're going to be." She straightened out his long-fingered hands. "We can't help where we're born, Dan, or the start we get in life. If you had been given the opportunity, those hands could have been a doctor's hands. You could have been as skillful with a scalpel as a six-gun."

"It's too late now," Dan Rollins said.

"But not for the son I hope we'll have," Sharon said simply. "I want our son to stand tall and straight like you. I'd like for him to be a doctor. I want him to save life instead of taking it. I don't want him to be around violence and bloodshed and the hatreds that men bear each other."

"Then we'll work for that," Dan Rollins said.

"Dan," Sharon called from the bed.

Rollins pulled up a chair and sat down. She was beautiful, this wo-

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

man he had married, with her chestnut hair spread over the pillow. He took her hand.

"What is it?" he asked.

For a moment she didn't answer. She spread his fingers, the slender, long fingers that had been so deadly fast with the long-barreled Colts. Then she said: "We'll name him Lonnie. Lonnie Dan Rollins." She raised her eyes to his. "Did you see, Dan? His fingers are just like yours."

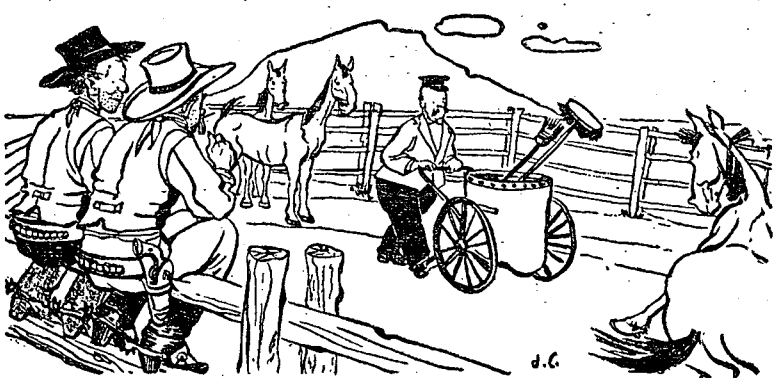
Dan thought of what Sharon had said that first night they'd moved into this cabin. He knew what she was thinking.

"We're getting ahead, Sharon," he said. "We've got water, and there's all the range in the world here. We can make the Rocking Chair into one of the finest spreads south of the Columbia. If hard work can make things go, we'll see to it that this son of yours gets the finest medical education a boy can have."

She smiled at him then with a tenderness that a husband and wife can feel only at such a time. She whispered: "I'm a wise woman, Dan, to have married you."

When Lonnie was eleven he was a pocket-sized edition of his father. Too, there was a natural quickness about him, and a complete lack of fear that sometimes alarmed his mother and made Dan Rollins feel a gusty pride that he did not put into words.

Then one day the Circle H which bordered Rocking Chair to the north was sold to a bull-necked, belligerent stranger named York Hardman. Dan had heard about the sale, but he didn't recognize the name until the man rode into his ranch yard one evening while Dan was replacing a corral post. Immediately he recognized Hardman as a small rancher who had belonged to a pool in Arizona, and had hired the Chinquapin Kid along with some other gun-slingers. For a moment Hardman didn't



"Some dern new-fangled idee Paw brung back from New York."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

budge from his horse. He sat staring down, his green eyes wide in utter astonishment.

"Howdy, Hardman," Dan said. "Quite a ways from your reservation, ain't you?"

"Well, I'll sure be double-damned," Hardman bellowed. "If it ain't the Chinquapin Kid. Up here in Oregon nursing a bunch of cows, and he ain't even wearing his guns."

"You're wrong, Hardman," Dan said quietly. "The name is Rollins. Dan Rollins."

"The devil," sneered Hardman. "You was the Chinquapin Kid when I knowed you. You're a little older, and you ain't got your hoglegs, but you're still the Chinquapin Kid."

"I said you was wrong," Dan said, his voice still under control. "The Chinquapin Kid is dead. I saw him die in a Nevada town twelve years ago."

"And I say you're a double-damned liar," Hardman snapped. "I know you're the Chinquapin Kid. Don't see no reason why you should be trying to lie out of it."

"Git down," Dan said.

There was no mistaking his intention. Hardman looked at him in surprise for a moment. Then he said, "Sure," and stepped down with alacrity. "I never seen a gun-slinger in my life who was any good with his fists."

York Hardman saw something new that evening. Dan Rollins gave him a thundering licking, and when Hardman climbed back on his horse, his face ripped to ribbons, he said: "Don't ever step on my land, Rollins, or I'll give you a .30-30 slug."

"I'm willing to stay home," Dan said coldly, and watched Hardman ride off. He hadn't seen Lonnie until then, hadn't known the boy was in the barn watching everything. Not until Lonnie came out.

"You sure licked him, dad," Lonnie said proudly.

Rollins put a hand to a bruised cheek. He looked at the boy, the bitter passion that had been in him sweeping out of him. Instead he felt consternation and a sudden fear as he wondered what Sharon would think.

"Who was the Chinquapin Kid?" asked Lonnie.

"A man I used to know," Rollins answered evasively. "Guess I'll finish this job tomorrow."

Later, after Lonnie had gone to sleep, Sharon faced Dan in the big living room. The old cabin was gone. The Rocking Chair had done well. There should be no doubt about Lonnie's education.

"What's happened?" Sharon asked hotly. "You have a fight right here within sight of your son. He was asking me about the Chinquapin Kid."

Rollins told her then. "I couldn't do much else," he finished lamely.

"It would be easy," Sharon said angrily, "for Lonnie to become another Chinquapin Kid. You didn't have to fight."

"Mebbe there are some things a woman can't understand," Dan Rollins said. "Like the things that make a man fight. Some day Lonnie has to learn what they are."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"How would you know?" Sharon asked almost sarcastically.

"You taught me," Dan Rollins' voice was gentle. Then he repeated Sharon's words: "'I want our son to stand tall and straight.' That's the way I aim to raise Lonnie. If he's going to be that kind of a man he's got to learn that a man fights for the things he believes in, the things that are his, the things that he loves. That's what you've taught me, Sharon."

"I taught you that?" Sharon asked.

Rollins knew his wife was looking back, seeing him standing in the foot-trodden schoolyard, his smoking gun in his hand, the redhead lying in the dust in front of him. The Chinquapin Kid had not fought then for the things he believed in, nor for the things that were his, nor for the things he had loved.

The past came rushing up again to Dan Rollins. The Chinquapin Kid was dead, but he wouldn't stay buried. He was here in his wife's thinking, in the fears she held for her son. So Dan Rollins said roughly: "Lonnie won't be another Chinquapin Kid. I'll see that he doesn't get guns. He'll never know what it is. No Rocking Chair hand will pack an iron. Lonnie will be a doctor." Then Dan Rollins wheeled out of the room.

By the time Lonnie was eighteen he was not only a carbon copy of his father but he was as big as Dan Rollins. A few pounds lighter, eyes a shade darker, the stubble on his cheeks not quite as tough, but in other things they were alike as two shells in a cartridge belt. Young Lonnie Rollins was a credit to any man, they said in that mountain country. And, in turn, Lonnie was respected because he was Dan's son; for no man between the Columbia and the California line had a bigger spread than Dan, a lovelier wife, nor a better reputation for fair dealing.

Dan Rollins should have had everything that it took to make a man happy. But he wasn't happy because there was always with him the ghost of the Chinquapin Kid. The ghost ate with him as Dan sat across the table from Lonnie and felt the likeness his son bore him. The ghost was with him when he rode with Lonnie. Folks said they rode exactly alike. Dan had heard them say: "They ride alike and they look alike, them two. Can't tell which one it is when you see one coming till you're right up to 'em."

The ghost was with Dan at night, too, when he lay beside Sharon in bed and looked up at the moon-whitened ceiling. He had time to think, then, and worry. This was the year Lonnie left home to go to medical school. Whatever happened, Lonnie had to be a doctor. That was what Sharon wanted. In a way she had said it was to be his job to save lives to make up for those the Chinquapin Kid had taken. Lonnie knew, had known for years, he was to be a doctor; but he had not said he'd go to medical school, had never said he wanted to be a doctor.

It was the summer Lonnie turned eighteen that Fat Calhoun signed on with the Rocking Chair. The name

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fat fitted Calhoun the same way a big-bellied man's gun belt would fit a barber-shop wooden Indian. He was as long as a ketch rope, as thin and as tough, or so they said on Rocking Chair. There was no gun on Fat Calhoun's hip, but he was the sort of man who looked only half-dressed without one.

Dan Rollins noted these things, but he took Calhoun on because he was short-handed at the time. Besides, the sullen peace that had existed between York Hardman and Dan Rollins for years was threatened. Hardman had gradually acquired a crew of tough hands, and was showing signs of expanding southward into Rocking Chair range. Rollins didn't have a gun fighter on his pay roll. Perhaps it was because Calhoun looked like one that Rollins was prompted to take him on.

Many times that summer Lonnie and Calhoun would ride away together on Sunday afternoons. Once when Rollins questioned Lonnie, the boy shrugged, and answered carelessly: "Oh, I listen to him spin his yarns." He grinned at Dan. "He sure is a liar, dad. I've heard a lot of them, but Fat tops them all."

The morning before Lonnie was to leave for school Dan was riding along the rim above the river when he heard the steady thunder of guns. He looked over the rim, and there on the river bank below him were Fat Calhoun and Lonnie. Gun belts were strapped around Lonnie's waist. The holsters were low and tied by tightly drawn thongs. Only a gunslinger could have shown him how to do it. Rollins watched the boy make a draw and empty the Colt at a target that had been placed against the side of a ridge. It was a beautiful display of muscular swiftness.

A cold, merciless anger was in Dan Rollins when he found a break in the rim and rode down to the river. He dismounted, and walked up to them. Neither Calhoun nor Lonnie saw him until he was close. Then Lonnie looked up, and his lips began to tighten.

"I know," Lonnie said, and began to take off his guns. "We don't have these around Rocking Chair. They're poison, and I'm supposed to be a sawbones."

Rollins stood motionless while the boy took off his gun belts, and laid them on the river bank. Then he faced his father, head held high, back arrow-straight. "Seems like my life has been planned for me from the time I was born," he said. "Did it ever strike you I might not want to be a sawbones?"

The ghost of the Chinquapin Kid was there with them. He was telling Dan Rollins that he was here in the boy. "He's got your old, fiddle-footed ways," the ghost was saying. "You can't make a doctor out of him."

But Dan Rollins was not one to listen. He said roughly: "You'll be a doctor, son. Now mount up and go back home."

Neither Rollins nor Calhoun moved until Lonnie was out of sight beyond the rim. Then Rollins turned to Calhoun.

"Put up your fists, Fat," he said. "I'm going to lick hell out of you."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The man gave Rollins a flat-lipped grin. "I'll not fight with you, Rollins. I've got nothing to fight for. But I'll tell you one thing. You're gonna drive that kid of yours into being an outlaw, and he'll make a hell of a tough one."

"And you'll be the one that taught him how," Rollins said furiously. "Put up your hands."

"No." Calhoun backed away toward his horse. "Nobody needed to teach that kid. It was born in him. He's the fastest man with an iron I ever saw, and I've traveled in some fast company. I never saw the Chinquapin Kid, but I've got a hunch Lonnie would be as good."

Calhoun watched Rollins' face grow suddenly old, and his laugh was harsh and mirthless. "Yeah, I know. I've heard of the Chinquapin Kid before I ever hit Oregon. The old-timers still talk of him along the border. Hell on high, red wheels with a hogleg, they say. He'd kill for a dollar. Now he's up here in Oregon, hating guns and trying to fit his kid into some damned kind of a pattern that the kid don't want to fit into. And, feller, I'm here to say that Lonnie is the finest boy I ever rode with." Calhoun stepped into his saddle, and gave his parting shot. "I'd even go so far as to say he's too fine a boy for the man who used to be the Chinquapin Kid." Then he rode away.

For a long time Dan Rollins didn't leave the river. He picked up the guns, and strapped the belts around him. They were good guns, the kind an expert would have. Probably they had been Fat Calhoun's, and Lonnie had bought them from him. He thought about what Calhoun had said. He thought dully about how he'd tried to live after the Chinquapin Kid had died. He'd tried to live again in his son, tried to make the man out of his son he might have been. Over and above everything else he thought about Sharon, and what she would say when she heard what had happened. She'd blame him. She might even leave him.

Dan mounted and slowly rode back to the rim. He didn't know what to do, or what he should do. He was still thinking dully about it when he heard the steady beat of gunfire north of him. He turned his horse toward it. It died as suddenly as it had come, but Rollins rode on. An hour later he met one of his riders lurching in the saddle, his shirt blood-stained.

"Hell to pay," the man muttered as he rode up to Rollins. "York Hardman's bunch hit us in Squaw Canyon. They got Bert and Jughead, and reckon they thought they got me. We didn't have no guns, Dan. You never let us carry. . ."

"I know," Rollins said wearily. A sense of utter frustration washed over him. He remembered telling Sharon that a man fights for the things that are his, yet he had done his best through the years to keep Lonnie from being able to fight. Now he'd have to face York Hardman alone, for the rest of his crew was twenty miles to the south. "Go on home, Pete. Sharon will patch you up. Tell Lonnie to ride into town and bring the sheriff back."

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"They'll be plumb up in the rough country with your beef by that time," the rider told him. "So far away nobody'll ever catch 'em. That's what Hardman's figgering on. He's aiming to bust you."

"I'll trail them," Rollins said. "Go on before you bleed to death."

"But there was half a dozen of 'em," the man said.

"Go on," repeated Rollins, and rode away.

Rollins found where the cattle had been when Hardman's bunch struck. He found the bodies of the two dead men, and mentally cursed himself for not allowing them to carry guns. He went on slowly and warily. The training that the Chinquapin Kid had received through the bloody years came back to him. Hardman would be at his home ranch by noon. There likely they would change horses, and go on.

It was after noon by the time Rollins reached the pocket that held York Hardman's Circle H buildings. Hardman was still there. The cattle were being held above the house. Two men were with them. The rest were probably eating dinner. Rollins saw his chance. There would be four men in the house including Hardman himself. That was long odds, even for the Chinquapin Kid when he had been in his prime. Long odds or not, it was the way Rollins had to play it. If he didn't get them now, he'd never get them, and Rocking Chair couldn't afford to lose that much beef.

The men with the herd couldn't see below the barn. That gave Rollins an opportunity to reach the house. If the men were eating dinner, they wouldn't be looking for trouble. York Hardman would be thinking he had one day, perhaps two, to get the herd on over the mountains and hide the trail. So Dan Rollins left his horse, and raced across the yard to the house. He plucked guns as he went through the door. There were four men at the long table. It was Hardman who saw Rollins as he came in. He let out a hoarse yelp of fear and came up, hand sweeping downward for gun butt. It never touched the bone handle, for as his splayed fingers went down, Dan Rollins laced a bullet through his heart.

It wasn't the old Chinquapin Kid who stood there swapping lead with the outlaw pack. It was Dan Rollins, respected owner of the Rocking Chair, but the old magic that had made the Chinquapin Kid what he was came back to the long-fingered hands. Another man fell face down into his plate of beans, and then rolled off his chair to the floor. Another broke for the window, stumbled before he reached it, and fell headlong. The last one was a hard-eyed rider who looked a lot like Fat Calhoun. He missed his first shot, but his second smashed Rollins off his feet.

Dan Rollins thought, in that one head-spinning interval, that he was a dead man. The Circle H rider was bringing his gun down for a final shot, and there was nothing for Dan Rollins to do but reach for his dropped gun, and know there wasn't time. He had the feeling he was hearing other guns outside, and

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thought it was the two men with the herd who had joined the fight, but there were no bullets splintering the floor around him. There was just this one man bringing his gun down, taking his time as if he had all day. Rollins' fingers had closed over his gun butt, but he still knew there was not time. The hammer of the Circle H man's gun was back, the trigger finger tightening, but the shot never came. Not that one. Another gun roared from behind Rollins. Once. Then twice. The outlaw broke at knee and waist, and sprawled face down on the floor.

"You all right, Dan?" It was Fat Calhoun, a smoking gun in his hand. Crowding behind him was Lonnie, a gun in his hand. Rollins rubbed a hand across his eyes when he saw those guns. They were the ones that had been packed away in his valise back in his bedroom. Slowly Rollins pulled himself up, and fell over on his side.

"Take it easy, dad," Lonnie said as he knelt beside Rollins. "You're gonna stay here for a spell till we get the doc. Help me get this hole plugged so he won't bleed so much, Fat, and then you hit the breeze for town. Mom's coming, dad, soon as she gets Pete patched up."

"You mean your mother's coming up here?" Rollins demanded incredulously.

Lonnie grinned and nodded. "Yep. She says the women have to fight for the things that are theirs just like men do. And the things that they love."

"Those guns?" asked Rollins. "Where did you get them?"

"Mom gave them to us," Lonnie answered. "She said the Chinquapin Kid used to cary them. She said the Kid was always a fair fighter and a good fighter. She said . . ."

"Wait," Rollins said wearily. He was going to pass out, and he knew it, but there was one thing he wanted to say first, one thing he should have said there on the river bank hours before. "If you don't want to be a medico, son, it's all right with me. Your mother . . ."

"I know," Lonnie broke in. "I was talking with her about it when we heard. It doesn't make so much difference to her. I want to be a cowman, dad. I want to stay here with you, and . . ."

But Dan Rollins wasn't listening. He'd passed out. Together Lonnie and Fat Calhoun lifted him to the couch. Then they carried the dead men outside.

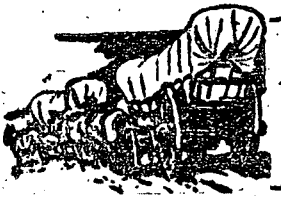
"Get going, Fat," Lonnie said, "and tell that medico to burn the breeze getting here. Mebbe sawbones *are* some good."

Hours later when Rollins came to, Sharon was sitting beside the couch. She smiled as she reached for his hand. "Everything's all right, Dan. Everything."

"Yes," Dan whispered. He knew that everything was all right, for at last the ghost of the Chinquapin Kid had been buried.

THE END

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

BY JOHN NORTH

To the outdoorsman campfires are a necessity—and an art. Essential for his cooking, often needed to keep him warm, they are built carefully for a specific purpose. A small, hot fire for a quick meal; something more substantial for a full course dinner; blazing logs for comfort and company when evening draws night's chill blanket over the waning rays of twilight in the wilderness.

Reader H. B., of Amsterdam, New York, has asked us this week to give out with some pointers on the various kinds of practical campfires used by experienced outdoorsmen. "Add, if you can," his letter said, "some tips on campfire safety."

Glad you put that in about campfire safety, H. B., as it is a mighty important angle. To start with, remember that a fire built on gravel or sand is generally safe, but never set your fire on peat soil such as is sometimes found in woods country. Peat will burn. And slow-burning peat may carry fire under the surface to break out later at some other spot long after you have gone, even though you punctiliously extinguished the fire at your original campsite.

Two other safety tips should be practised until they become second nature on any camping trip. Never leave a campfire untended. And just because a fire is only smoldering, don't *guess* that it is out, or safe. Be sure not one live coal remains before you abandon a campfire. Soaking the coals thoroughly with water is the best system. If no water is at hand, smothering the embers with sand will do the trick just as well.

For camp cooking, the trench fire is a good bet in windy weather or during the season where everything is tinder-dry. A trench fire is useful, too, where fuel is scarce. It conserves heat.

Trench fires should be dug about a foot deep, and nearly as wide, in a general line with the wind, and slightly funnel-shaped. Make the end towards the wind wider than the rest of the trench and slope the trench floor slightly upward towards the narrow, or chimney, end. The idea of this, of course, is to provide a good draft. Build your fire in the trench. Sticks of split-dry wood burn best, but if the draft is strong, using green wood will afford a slower-burning fire. Heavier sticks or poles of green wood laid across the top of the trench will do nicely to support cooking utensils.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

For use in a semi-permanent camp or where several days' stay is being made in one spot, the trench fire can, if suitable stones are available, be lined with flat rocks. The trench fire is similar to a miniature barbecue pit, and what a good camp cook can't do with strips of meat properly sauced and hung over the coals to broil isn't in the book!

For frying the breakfast bacon, or boiling an aromatic pot of early-morning coffee a small fire is all that is necessary. Sound, dry twigs to start the blaze and a few larger dry sticks, criss-crossed or built up into a loose cone with plenty of air space for draft, will boil up coffee in jig time.

Don't set the pot directly on the fire, of course. Hang it over the blaze by means of a slanting pole set across a forked stake driven into the ground, and held steady at whatever height or angle desired by a heavy rock placed on the lower end of the pole.

If the campfire is to be used for cooking dinner a few pains taken in preparation of the fireplace will be well rewarded. It only takes a few minutes to erect a three-sided fireplace out of flat rocks. Have the open end facing the wind. The fireplace need not be big. One enclosing a foot or fifteen-inch square fire bed will be plenty large enough.

Another system is to form a V-shaped fireplace out of two fairly large green logs. Make the V with the open side to the wind. The logs should be about five feet long. Build the cooking fire at the open end of the V. Pots and pans of stuff that are ready may be set back of the fire across the closed end of the V, and the food kept hot until it's time to holler, "Come an' get it!"

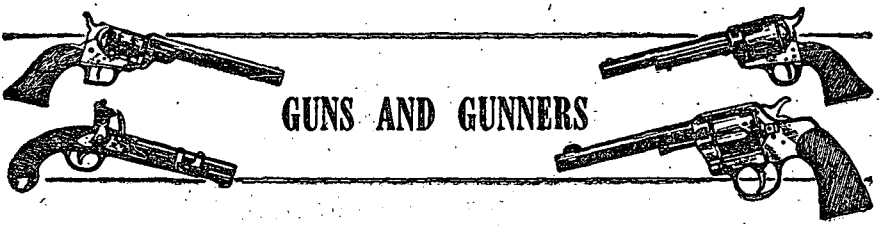
After supper the log V can be opened, and the fire built up to provide the bright blaze and cheery warmth of the traditional camper's evening fire.

For cold climate or winter camping warmth, a reflector fire will direct heat into an open tent front or lean-to shelter. To prepare this fire, drive two stout green stakes, slanting slightly backward into the ground about four feet apart. Against these rest some good-sized green logs five feet long, resting one on top of the other until the pile is, say, three feet high. In front of this backlog wall of wood place two similar logs pointing forwards. These serve as andirons. Start your fire between them, then build it up with cuts of large wood laid across the improvised andirons.

The piled row of solid logs behind the fire will act as a reflector, throwing most of the fire's heat forward where it is wanted. It also serves as a sort of chimney leading the smoke upward.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



BY CAPTAIN PHILIP B. SHARPE

SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE—Since last writing I've returned from a few weeks in Eastern France, Belgium, Luxemburg and Germany. I've seen death and destruction wholesale. But I've found gun bugs. Being a bug on this subject isn't so bad. Had to survey a few bomb-wrecked plants in a German city where I spent three days, and got my data on plants from the officials of the Military Government of that city. Carried a driver and interpreter with me and we took turns on guard at night in enemy territory, sleeping on the rubble-strewn floor of a bombed-out plant.

One day I mentioned to the Allied Military Government officer in charge of plants and public utilities, something about guns. He dug out one he wanted identified. I obliged. Then he asked: "Are you the Phil Sharpe who does the gun stuff for Western Story?" That's all it took. Soon I was installed in the only hotel left standing, my men were billeted in a large apartment house, and I spent a fine evening talking guns with boys who love sporting weapons but hate military arms. Incidentally, the Allied Military Government, or AMG, boys are doing a very good job.

The world over, there is a bond between gun bugs. I've talked with so many that I've lost count. But the universal opinion is that the U. S. carbine, caliber .30, is not a hunting rifle. It has killed plenty of Nazis, but it won't kill deer. Don't try to use it for wild game. Nazis are different.

But, under all conditions, the gun bug lives on. I sat down to a mess wearing my .45 on my belt. We had an exceptionally good meal for the front, disturbed only by the dull thunder of bombs, a few miles away. Every officer at the table wore a gun. Orders.

After the meal we all retired to our rooms. Someone tuned in a German radio to AFN, Paris-American Forces Network, and a program of popular American songs came through. Even the nostalgia they produced couldn't stop our conversation from eventually turning to guns, which is naturally a subject of vital interest to all of us. It would do your heart good to hear those officers arguing!

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I'd like to mention a couple of items which have passed censorship for release and so can be passed along to you.

Remember the big plant of Gustav Genschow in Frankfurt-am-Main, makers of Geco rifles and ammunition? I walked over it. Just a pile of debris from bombs.

Nevertheless there are still a few ideas left in Germany—at this writing. One of the most interesting is the Volksturm Gewehr—the home defense rifle. First samples of this were taken in the factory of J. P. Sauer & Sohn, one of the most famous of arms makers. Not so long ago this firm made shotguns valued at $1,500, but among the war items they produced was the cheapest rifle ever made for military ammunition—the VG I. I looked that gun over carefully. Nothing fitted. According to American standards it must have cost about three dollars to make. The fit of all the parts is beyond my ability to describe. Germany has dispensed with the proof-testing of arms.

Here is the dope on it: Caliber: 7.92 mm., the standard German cartridge. Stock: Walnut—flat sides because it saves machine work. Sling: Web, canvas. Barrel: Roughest outside I have ever seen. Receiver: Made of bar stock, a minimum of very rough machining. Bolt: Case hardened, cheap and insecure; I issued an order for men under me never to fire it from the shoulder.

And this junk from J. P. Sauer & Sohn! Sure you want a Sauer, now?

But there are still good German guns, made prior to the war. Take, for instance, that rifle I have. It is a Schuetzen with a Martini-type action and a barrel for the 8 x 57 mm. Rimmed. A beautiful job. Finest of carving on the walnut stock. The action engraved with the most beautiful of stags and hunting scenes you could ask for. Twelve pounds of rifle designed for off-hand shooting at 200 meters (219 yards). Double-set triggers, with the normal at 2 pounds and the set at 5 ounces. The trigger pull is adjustable, and it will hold at one ounce. Those German craftsmen used to build guns that were real guns. They would shoot, and the German of yesteryear loved to shoot—not just kill.

The G.I. Joes will mail home a few souvenirs. Among them will be the usual Model 98 rifle and carbine. These are sent home primarily for use in hunting. But a few of the boys will send home some of these precision Schuetzen rifles. *Those* guns will shoot! However, the boys do not seem to be interested in foreign ammunition. They want to convert those guns to handle American cartridges. With new barrels, it can be done. And those are the lads who will do it.

Phil Sharpe, our firearms editor, is now on active duty as a Captain, Ordnance Department, U. S. A. Although he will still answer letters from readers, we ask your indulgence, as the war emergency will naturally cause some delay. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MINES AND MINING

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

FROM Dicks Creek below Dent to Moscow Bar, the North Fork of the Clearwater River in the wilderness country of central Idaho is placer gold territory. Considerable hand shoveling and small-scale placer mining was done here before the war by prospectors camped along the stream.

Generally the miners made beans and bacon, with enough encouragement to keep them pecking away in the hope of hitting a richer pocket, or making a better-than-average strike. The occasional richer patches of gravel found in the district, which also includes the general drainage basin of the North Fork, sometimes ran better than $1.00 a yard, according to reports. Some of the prospectors, it is claimed, cleaned up over $1,000 in a single season.

The gold values found in the North Fork of the Clearwater appear to have been carried down from the upper region of the drainage basin. This should suggest to future gold seekers hitting the territory the possibilities in prospecting thoroughly the lesser known and smaller tributary creeks that empty into the upper North Fork.

It is also worth noting that in a section rich enough to provide "wages" for the individual gold hunter, there is likely to be the further chance of uncovering deposits of gravel too lean for profitable hand work but sufficiently extensive to provide the basis of a larger-scale placer-mining operation. As a matter of fact, such operations have already been carried on in the North Fork district.

This gold country around the North Fork of the Clearwater may be the sort of section Reader J. C. from Oakland, California, has in mind. One of these days he wants to head, his letter says, for a backwoods gold-placer section right in the United States where a prospector can probably carry himself along and have a chance to hit something fairly worthwhile.

J. C. has prospected before—in California. And he has developed a sound philosophy of prospecting. He knows it is no soft touch, no easy, get-rich-quick scheme for some Johnny-Come-Lately barging into the diggings with dreams of a million-dollar bonanza. He knows it's hard, outdoors work, and that it takes enterprise and initiative to make a success of it.

Though fairly good U. S. Forest Service roads, often steep and narrow, and a host of trails criss-cross the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

North Fork of the Clearwater country, the chances are, J. C., you'll have to pack in the last five or ten miles. You had better take along everything you are going to need when you start, camping equipment, grub and so on.

The North Fork area is rugged mountain and forest country. The "open season," as far as climate is concerned, usually lasts from about April or May to November. The rest of the year the section is almost always tightly snowbound.

Water for washing the gold gravel through rockers, or small-scale sluice boxes during the summer is dependent on the extent of the previous winter's snows rather than on rainfall. As a consequence, light winters may be followed by a water shortage as early as June or the first of July. But usually even in the smaller creeks the water lasts longer, sometimes well through the open season.

Aside from the length of river from Dicks Creek to Moscow Bar already mentioned as placer gold bearing, another reportedly good area is up in the isolated country in the corner of Clearwater County, Shoshone County and the Montana border above the Cedars Ranger Station. Long, Chamberlain, Dill and Meadows Creeks and Vanderbilt Gulch in this section have been the scene of prospecting and placer mining in the past.

Further south around Moose City, one of the old early-day gold-mining camps, prospectors appear to have been doing themselves some good before the war on such streams as Slide, Deadwood, Independence and Ossier Creeks.

In the vicinity of Pierce, where gold was first discovered in Idaho in 1860, prospecting has continued right into modern times. Many of the richer streams have been worked and reworked. They are sometimes found worth still another careful checkup, particularly in the harder-to-reach sections where a persistent prospector may discover a forgotten patch of workable ground, or a spot in which new gold values have accumulated since it was originally worked in the bonanza days years ago.

Prospecting suggestions in the Pierce neighborhood include French, Rhodes, Shanghai, Orofino and Quartz Creeks, and Clearwater and Armstrong Gulches. These have all been active in recent years.

North of Pierce, the Democrat Mountain region might be well worth more intensive future attention. Some gold has been reported taken from Poormans, Cow, Reeds and Snake Creeks in this area but, because of its inacessibility, the location hasn't been the scene of as much prospecting in the past as districts easier to reach.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply. Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received; please keep them as brief as possible.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A fortune in gold or a boothill bonanza—which would Lon Burdick get out of that ill-fated partnership with a double-crossing tinhorn?

DEATH TRESPASS

by RAY PALMER TRACY

WHEN Lon Burdick drove his burro up the street of the New Mexico boom camp of Silver Gulch the trampled snow on the bluff-rimmed street was a dirty white. But here and there it was mellowed by streaks of early evening lamp light from the windows of saloons, dance halls and stores which kept open all night in a place where it

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

seemed no one ever dared sleep.

The camp had nearly doubled in size since spring when Lon had come into it broke. He had had a few rich gold samples from distant Burro Creek and Jess Faber, owner of the Silver Toss Saloon, had grubstaked him. Now Lon was impatient to throw the pokes of gold in front of Faber and see the man's reaction.

Leaving his burro and depleted packs at the livery stable at the upper end of the street, Lon hurried to the Silver Toss and shoved through the crowd spewing in and out of the flapping doors.

A cloud of tobacco smoke and the scent of beer and whiskey struck him in a warm wave. A piano and guitar made music in the back where men were whirling about the floor with dance hall girls. The long bar was also lined with men and girls. At the roulette wheel a miner was yelling with triumph over a winning streak.

Lon found a place at the bar and ordered a drink. Immediately a girl squeezed in beside him.

"Hello," she greeted. Then: "Why, I remember you. You were here last spring."

Lon was easy to remember on account of his size. He recalled seeing the girl before and wondered again why one so young and pretty was in this place. "Yes, I was here," he admitted. "Have a drink?"

The bartender had already set up another glass without waiting for the order. "Where'll I find Jess Faber?" Lon asked him.

The bartender looked at him with narrowed interest. "Why?"

"Faber grubstaked me last spring and I want to report," answered Lon.

"In that case, he's in his office." The bartender gestured toward a door back of the poker tables.

The girl waited until the bartender turned away. "I remember about that grubstake," she said in a low voice. "Watch your step, prospector." She laughed loudly as the bartender glanced their way. "Bring anything with you out of the hills besides feetless sox?" she kidded.

"A color or two," answered Lon with a shrug.

The girl gave the bulge in Lon's shirt front an appraising glance. "If you had luck, don't forget what I told you," she whispered and hurried away.

Lon wondered what the girl's warning meant. It was on his mind as he made his way through the crowd to the closed door and knocked.

"Come in," invited the voice of Faber.

A hanging lamp gave light for the little room and shone down on a flat-topped desk at which sat Jess Faber. He was a tall man with a big nose and a scraggly appearance that, in spite of his fine clothing, reminded one of a buzzard. A big safe stood in one corner of the room. Beside the safe was a file case.

Faber scowled at the interruption. He didn't recognize his visitor until Lon came out of the shadows and stood under the light.

Faber's reaction was strange. His hand made a swift gesture toward an open drawer of his desk. Forewarned, Lon started to reach for the

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

weapon he wore cowboy fashion. But Faber caught himself and turned his hostile move into a flourish of greeting.

"Well, well," he said, "this *is* a surprise!"

"I don't see why," returned Lon. "Fall and the snow were bound to drive me out."

"Grubstakers often go the other way—if they make a strike," Faber spoke as though he had foreknowledge of Lon's movements. Then he corrected himself with: "Have any luck?"

"I found gold like I expected." Lon dropped several pokes on the desk. He felt let down over his reception.

Faber eyed the pokes and waited expectantly. "Where's the rest of it?" he asked.

"Rest of it!" Lon looked at him with angry inquiry. "How much did you expect me to take out in about thirty days of actual placering? You figger it was laid out in little piles for me to scoop up?"

"Keep your shirt on," placated Faber. "I had an idear the strike would be rich like them California diggings."

"It's plenty rich, and there's plenty waiting for us when we get fixed for it right," Lon returned shortly. Faber had practically accused him of hiding out part of the take.

"Yes, yes, of course," agreed Faber.

Lon picked up a set of gold scales on top of the safe and set them on the desk beside the pokes of gold. "We'll weigh it and see how much we've got," he said.

When he had finished he had two piles of a little more than three thousand dollars each. Lon returned his share to his pokes and then made out a receipt for Faber to sign.

"Don't you trust me?" Faber asked with a scowl.

"Just the same as you trust me," retorted Lon. "I signed the grubstake agreement."

Faber picked up the pen and signed. "Have any trouble?" he inquired casually as he put his share of the gold in his safe.

"There was someone snooping around my camp for the last month I was there."

"Who was it?" Faber was watching Lon intently.

Lon had stalked a silver-haired man he had discovered spying on his camp. He had quit when the man was joined by another. There might be still more of them. Something warned him not to tell Faber too much.

"Just caught a glimpse of a coupla fellers," he evaded.

"Then you didn't see what they looked like?"

"Too far away. But I figgered they was after my gold or the claims, so I pulled out between two suns."

"That was right. Can't be too careful where there's gold," approved Faber. "You put up monuments and cover all the good ground?"

Lon nodded. "The minute I was sure I'd made a strike, I staked all I figgered was worth anything." That was true. Later, though, he had discovered that the gold did not come from Burro Creek at all, but from a segment of an ancient stream bed

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which crossed the creek at nearly right angles. He had already stripped about all the gold from the claims he had marked. There'd be time to tell Faber later, if this peculiar manner of the saloonman turned out to be just his way.

"Now that everything is settled," said Faber, suddenly in a friendly and expansive mood, "I suppose you want a little action on your gold, after being out in the hills all summer."

Lon shook his head. "I never been much for drinkin' and I can't gamble for shucks. Besides, I'm going to need this gold to pay my share for fixing up to shovel out the real killing next summer."

"Nonsense! You can make it all up in a few days!" scoffed Faber. "You need to blow off a little steam and here's a good place to do it." He pointed through the door of the office. "Git in, boy, and enjoy yourself. You don't have to shoot the works. But when a man makes a strike, he's due for a little high rolling."

"It ain't fun for me," argued Lon. "This gold was too hard come by to throw it away."

"Well, come out and have a drink with me," Faber linked his arm through Lon's and urged him out into the roaring saloon where silver-ladened prospectors and miners were playing the games, pouring their wealth into Faber's greedy hands.

Faber signaled a bartender to set up a bottle and a couple of glasses. "Help yourself, boy," he invited largely.

Lon filled his glass and drank slowly. Keeping watch of Faber by means of the back mirror, he saw the saloonman signal to someone who now joined them at the bar.

"Hello, Deacon," greeted Faber. "Have a drink." He turned to Lon. "You two ought to get together," he said. "Deacon didn't have a very good season and can't play too high. I figger he'll be just about your speed. Deacon Silver, meet my mining partner, Lon Burdick. Lon's celebrating a little strike we made."

Lon hoped the shock of the meeting didn't show in his face. Deacon Silver was the man he had seen up on the rims above his diggings.

Now Lon understood Faber's manner when he had stepped into the office. Faber had sent men to watch and probably remove him. And when Lon had left the camp so mysteriously, Faber had thought his intended victim had become wise.

The big prospector shook his head. "Faber is mistaken," he said. "I don't care to celebrate."

Deacon Silver drew back, his frosty eyes belying his benign cast of countenance. "You figger I ain't honest enough for you to play with?" he demanded loudly.

"Of course you're honest!" returned Lon just as loudly. "But I don't want to play."

"I can vouch for Deacon being honest," put in Faber stiffly. "Don't be sore, Deacon. Lon didn't mean you're dishonest. I know you'll have a nice little game together with a few of the boys of about your own speed."

"I ain't going to have nobuddy

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

claiming I ain't honest," muttered Deacon. "Well, if he didn't mean it, we can go ahead and have a little game," he relented.

"Deacon Silver is touchy," explained Faber in a low tone. "But I'm sure he'll take my word that you didn't mean he was dishonest, if you act accordingly."

Lon saw a couple of hard characters edging toward them. Faber, he decided, was hoping he would refuse to play with Deacon so a fight to cover a murder could be started.

"I might play a few hands of straight poker," he said.

"That's the boy!" Faber covered his disappointment by slapping him heartily on the back. "See, Deacon, Lon didn't mean a thing!"

"Long's he's your partner, I'll forget it," Deacon said magnanimously.

Faber changed some of Lon's dust into double eagles. Then Deacon made a suggestion: "If Lon wants to be quiet, maybe you've got a private room we could use, Jess?"

"Nothing private about me!" roared Lon. "If I'm going to howl, I want to do it where I can be seen and heard! Give us a table right out here in the big room! There's one over by the window!" He strode toward the table just vacated. The baleful fire in Faber's eyes and the indecision that claimed Deacon told him he had scored. He bulled to the table and sat down with his back to the window.

"What you waiting for?" he bellowed at Deacon. "I thought you wanted to play!"

Everyone's attention was drawn to Lon and Deacon. There was nothing the silver-haired gambler could do but follow and make the best of it.

Lon glanced around. He wanted to rope in some player who would be an unsuspecting witness to the things Lon expected to develop in the game. But the table was instantly filled by Faber men.

Deacon introduced the three hard-faced men who had invited themselves into the game as Tip Ball, Sam Teach and Bill Smith.

By getting the game set out in the big room, Lon had hoped to stall Faber until he could get organized. Faber couldn't help but be aware of that and could not afford to wait. Some time after the game got under way, there would be a sudden accusation of crooked play and guns would smoke. A minute later Faber would be sole owner of the Burro Creek gold strike.

"As Faber said, I ain't in the chips heavy enough to play a big game," Deacon tried to live up to the character Faber had given him. "How about a twenty-five-dollar limit?"

The limit made no difference. The results would be the same. "Suits me," agreed Lon and stacked a hundred in twenties on the table.

Every man at the table matched his stack. They cut for deal and Teach won.

Lon could see no sense in waiting for Faber's tools to pick their time. His one chance was to strike first and unexpectedly.

While the other players were engrossed in the hands they had drawn, Lon grasped the table. He gave it

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a violent heave, upsetting players and raining money and cards into the confusion.

Spinning around, he dove headlong through the window. Sash and glass crashed under the impact. Lon dropped on his hands and knees in a drift of snow outside.

Back of him rose yells and oaths. A gun boomed and futile lead whined through the smashed window. Lon scrambled to his feet, plunged from between the buildings and mingled with the crowd in the dimly lighted thoroughfare.

Hunching his head down to keep his height from showing, he went up the street. Gunshots and yells in a Silver Gulch saloon meant nothing. No one would notice him unless he ran.

A few minutes later he was back at the livery stable. "I want to buy a horse and saddle," he told the liveryman. "It looks like a storm and I want to pull for the south before I get snowed in."

Everything was still quiet by Silver Gulch standards when Lon stepped up on his new mount. He didn't dare ride directly down the street, so he swung back of the line of buildings and kept there until he was nearing the lower end of the camp, when the encircling bluffs pinched in and forced him back to the main drag.

The only horseman in sight spotted him immediately. "There's that damned card-cheating hombre" came Teach's rasping tones followed by the roar of his gun.

Lon dug in his spurs and raced around a bend in the gulch out of sight before Teach could fire again. But he knew Faber would have men on his trail as soon as they could get mounts. So he pushed along fast as he dared.

He had purposely told the stableman that he was heading south, knowing it would be repeated. When he reached the forks of the trail, he turned north toward Santa Fe. The simple ruse might gain him a little time.

Around midnight he came to a huddle of Mexican adobes where the many branches of the Pedro Martinez family had banded together for protection against the Apaches. Lon knew them all well. Wrinkled old Pedro exposed yellow teeth in a grin of welcome when he answered Lon's knock at the door.

"Light down, put your horse in the barn and come in the house," Pedro said in English. But English failing to express his emotion adequately, he lapsed into the extravagant courtesies of Spanish.

"I'm in trouble and being pursued, Pedro," said Lon when he could break into the flow.

No surprise showed on the wrinkled face. "You can sleep in my house safely, *amigo*," promised Pedro with dignity, leading Lon to a sleeping room off the back hall of the big dobe. "I'll sit up and watch tonight," the oldster volunteered.

A couple of hours later Lon was awakened by voices. Pedro was in the front room shouting angry, profane Spanish. "Why do you *la-*

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drones come to disturb me in the middle of the night!" he yelled.

"Shut up!" snarled the voice of Teach. "Can't you understand English? We're lookin' fer a cheating crook named Lon Burdick. Have you seen him?"

"No savvy English!" squawled Pedro, loud enough to wake his remote relatives at the other end of the settlement.

"Yell all you want. Me and Teach are going through this joint and look for that coyote!" said a voice Lon recognized as belonging to Ball.

"No savvy!" Pedro shouted still louder.

Lon, gun in hand, slipped along the hall and into the front room.

"Lookin' for me?" he asked.

Teach and Ball already had their weapons in their hands. Teach fired like light. But he was in too big a hurry. His bullet thudded into the dobe beside Lon.

Lon didn't miss and Teach staggered back. Then he started forward as though he intended to barge across the room. One step and he collapsed, his weapon falling from his hand.

Ball, realizing his danger, spun from where he had been covering Pedro. As his gun swung, a silver streak sped through the air. Pedro's knife caught Ball in the throat. His gun was pointed toward the floor when a convulsive finger pressed the trigger.

"That's the end of those *ladrones*," said Pedro in English.

"I hope you won't get into trouble over this," Lon told him.

"Who knows they were ever here?" inquired Pedro calmly. "I have seen them before. They work for that wicked hombre, Jess Faber."

"What will you do with them?" Lon asked.

"I'll call the boys and have this carrion taken care of," said Pedro. "Their *caballos* will bring a price far from here. Go back to bed and sleep. The excitement is over. Only the work remains."

In the morning, when he ate breakfast in the big room, Lon saw no signs of last night's visit. Neither did Pedro mention it.

"It is a peaceful day, *amigo*," was all the old Mexican said.

"It is, indeed," agreed Lon.

At parting Lon placed two twenty-dollar gold pieces in the old man's hand—to Pedro a fortune.

Pedro's hand closed over the gleaming gold, even while he protested: "You pulled my sister's boy from under a stampede and you helped us when we starved. Besides, Jess Faber hired my sons to cut wood and paid them with kicks. Sometimes *Dios* allows wrongs to be righted this side of the grave."

"It is so," agreed Lon solemnly. "And remember, neither you nor yours has ever heard of me."

"No savvy," grinned Pedro as Lon rode away.

Lon made the rest of the trip to Santa Fe with little fear of being followed. It would be a long time before the disappearance of Teach and Ball, coupled with a fruitless search to the south, would suggest that the quarry had gone north.

Faber wouldn't know whether he had scared his grubstake partner out

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

or not, but he would have to prepare for trouble. However, Lon had a plan he thought would work.

When he reached Santa Fe, he banked his gold and then went to the new land office and filed on Burro Valley for a cattle ranch. In the spring he started for the scene of his strike with fifty head of cows and ten hard-case cowhands who had arrived from Texas with a trail herd. They liked the country and jumped at Lon's offer to take them on.

Jim Best, who had been foreman of the drive north, still retained his leadership. He was about Lon's age and size and wore a pair of guns in tied-down holsters. The others were mill-run, tough cowboys with the exception of one called Nat Sagler. Perhaps it was Nat's jealousy of Best that made him sour and unsocial. Lon only hired him because he was with the others and it seemed expected.

When the drive reached the high valley, there was plenty of evidence that Faber was on the scene. And as soon as he reached a place where he could see, Lon discovered bustling activity around the spot in Burro Creek where he had taken out his gold. Below the bluff and across the creek was Faber's camp.

Lon called his hands together and told them what they were really hired for. The only thing he held back was the secret of the ancient stream bed.

"I want Faber to claim that I no longer have an interest in this strike," he explained, "and I want you all to witness it. You stick with me and you'll all go out of here with a poke of gold. There's plenty of it around here and I'm the only one who knows where it is."

"I'm with you all the way," said Best promptly. "How about the rest of you?"

The lure of gold worked the way Lon knew it would. "Lead us to it!" came a chorus.

"Then we'll ride over to the claims and let Faber order us off—while we count his men," said Lon.

"First time," chuckled Best as they rode across the valley, "I ever heard of a man prospecting with a cow outfit."

There was a big NO TRESPASS sign, by order of Jess Faber, at the lower end of the claim. Lon rode on past it with his outfit.

Faber came out cautiously. "Hey!" he yelled. "Can't you read?"

"These claims are half mine," said Lon, but pulled up his horse.

"No, they ain't!" blustered Faber, emboldened as he saw Lon hesitate. "You abandoned 'em. I relocated the ground."

"I didn't abandon 'em!" denied Lon.

"When you didn't come to Silver Gulch this spring to plan for the summer, I sent men up here to look for you," said Faber, completely

---

Answers to puzzle on page 101

1. dun 2. shank 3. anvil 4. buscadero 5. flank 6. halter 7. vamoose 8. roan 9. stage 10. biscuit 11. badger 12. shakedown 13. owlhoot 14. brand 15. waterhole

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ignoring the circumstances under which Lon had left the Silver Toss. "They found you'd skipped. Ain't that so, Bill?"

There was a look of amusement on Bill Smith's hard face. He knew Lon would recognize him as one of the men who had sat at the poker table in the Silver Toss, and didn't care. "They was no monuments on these claims when I got here," he said.

"You bringing a bunch of cows in here shows what you think of the gold prospects," Faber went on, gathering assurance as Lon appeared to shy off, although his force outnumbered Faber's men by four. "You git off this ground and stay off!"

"I'll . . . I'll take it to court!" Lon threatened.

"Go ahead," invited Faber contemptuously. "Now git!"

Lon wheeled his horse and rode away, drawing his hands after him. Best pulled up beside him. "By Jehoshaphat!" he breathed. "If you hadn't put us wise, I'd have quit you for a yella skunk!"

Lon wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I had to take it to make what I've figgered out stick. A grubstake partnership is a hard thing to get out of. Now we'll make camp and get set for business."

Two hours later Lon planted a NO TRESPASS sign of his own just back from the point where the line of the mining claims came.

Faber couldn't see from the workings below and climbed up on the bank to take a look.

"What's the meaning of that?" he demanded of Lon, who with Best, was waiting for some such move.

"It means," accommodated Lon, "that I've filed on this entire valley for a ranch. It covers everything outside of what used to be *our* mining claims. You and your mangy crew keep on your own land or you'll get dropped on sight! Now *you* git!"

Faber wasn't prepared for the change in the man who had been almost cringing a short time before.

"Don't give me orders!" he roared.

Dirt flew from the ground between his feet as Best planted a bullet there. Faber dove back over the creek bank.

Lon's cowboys swept up to the bank and looked down on the confusion below. Faber's men were grabbing for their rifles.

"Hold it!" yelled Lon. "That shot was only a warning. But the next man of this double-crossing outfit who sets foot on my land will stay right there till his relatives, the coyotes and buzzards, clean him up!"

There was silence as the Faber men warily eyed the cowboys, obviously ready and eager for something to start.

"You was shooting off your lip a little while back, Faber," Lon prodded. "Ain't you got no comments? Maybe you're as yellow as you act!"

Faber wasn't yellow and Lon knew it. The Silver Gulch tinhorn was just taken by surprise. "I'll

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

keep off your land, and you keep off mine!" Faber blustered.

"I've filed on the creek water," Lon informed him. "You get too fresh and I'll turn the creek out of its channel above your claims!" With that thought he left, his crew at his back.

Now that a surprise attack from Faber was guarded against, Lon started his men sinking test holes back of the point.

The overburden was thin and the old stream bed followed an almost straight course until it suddenly swung west and vanished against a ledge as it had done against an upthrust bluff on the opposite side of the creek. A hundred yards up a steep slope above the ledge, was a bench with a big spring. The water from the spring ran down a slight depression in the bench and fell in a veillike spray to the creek below.

It was easy to divert the water and make it flow down Lon's side of the point. That way he avoided cutting through a ridge to divert the creek and escaped a certain clash with Faber.

Three claims took in the whole of the ancient stream bed from Burro Creek to where the ledge cut it off. Lon put up monuments and took all three claims in his own name. Then he called the boys together.

"I'd have got only half of this, even if Faber had acted like a white man," he told them. "I think I'm still entitled to half. You boys can have Faber's share—share and share alike—except for one share for an absent friend of all of us. It makes no difference where the gold is dug. All three claims go in the pool."

"Couldn't be fairer," Best declared. "And if them samples we dug out are any sign, I see where I placer me out a cow outfit."

There was a murmur of approval. Only Nat Sagler, to be contrary to Best, Lon thought, objected. "I don't see how you're entitled to half," Sagler complained. "Warn't for us, you couldn't take a flake of gold. And that absent friend ain't no kin of mine." He looked around for support, but got hooted down.

"If you don't like the deal, why don't you pull out, Nat," suggested Texas Grant.

For answer Nat walked away in a sulk.

They organized quickly. One man was posted on the bench by the spring, where he could keep watch on Faber and his outfit. The others went to work in the diggings.

The ground Faber was working was not turning out as rich as he had expected. As soon as he discovered Lon's new monuments, he knew the answer. In his rage, he risked coming up on the point. Lon and Best went to meet him.

"You damned crook!" accused Faber. "You staked them claims for us where you knew there was no gold! You gypped me!"

"How you make that out?" inquired Lon with infuriating innocence. "You said in front of plenty witnesses that I had abandoned the claims and there were no monuments on 'em when you showed up. So this strike, of course, has to be a new one. And I see some of your men

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

digging into the bank and into my claims. You tell 'em to quit!"

In his fury, Faber started to reach for his gun. Then he thought better of it. "I'll get you for this!" he threatened and went back over the bank.

This was the time when Faber could be counted on to do something. Lon called a meeting of his crew and suggested that they keep two men constantly on watch.

But the boys were taking out gold fast. Dazzled by it, they were in no mood to worry about Faber. Even Best was lukewarm. "Faber's shot his bolt and knows it," he expressed the general opinion. The idea of putting another man on guard was voted down.

Lon and all the others save Nat, whose turn it was to be on guard on the bench, were working the claims, when a rifle shot came from the bench. It was promptly followed by a volley of rifle fire from the creek bank.

At the first shot, lights sprayed up in Lon's head and then turned black. He went down, half in and half out of the pool of water at the end of the sluice box.

It seemed a long time afterwards, although it was probably only a couple of minutes, before Lon opened his eyes. A savage battle was in progress around him.

Stretched out on the slope of a low hill where they had attempted to take shelter, were Jack Sherman and Texas Grant. Some of the boys had made it behind the hill, for they were returning the fire of the men on the point.

Lon's head felt as though the whole top had been ripped away by a tearing process. However, he judged the wound was not as serious as it seemed. It was more the blow than the wound that had knocked him out.

His rifle lay beyond his reach, but he still had his six-gun. However, he didn't dare move for fear of drawing fire that would finish him.

As he rolled his eyes around his limited field of vision, he saw that Faber's men had the advantage. Somehow they had surprised the guard and now held the bench by the spring. All Faber had to do was send another man up on the bench to creep beyond the spring and outflank the men behind the hill.

With Jack and Texas out of it, the Faber men were not so badly outnumbered. Just up the slope from Lon, Bill Smith leaped from behind a boulder and raced for another huge rock around to the east. The position would place him on the other flank of Lon's fighting men.

In this new danger Lon forgot his wound and his exposed position. He leaped to his feet, his hand bringing up his six-gun.

Smith was taken by surprise, but he shot first. The wind from the bullet fanned Lon's hair. His own hand seemed wooden as he triggered his gun and the shot missed.

Again Smith fired. The lead seared Lon's side like a hot iron. Carefully he returned the fire. Smith bent at the waist and kept bowing over until he fell on his face and rolled down the slope.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lon, still half dazed, stood swaying until a rifle bullet screamed past his head. It awakened him to his exposed position.

At a staggering run, he made for the boulder toward which Smith had been headed. Lead cut the ground and air about him as he dove into the cover. A yell of triumph went up from his men, and a howl of rage from the Faber forces.

Lon saw that his purely instinctive move for self-preservation had changed the whole picture. He was now in a position to rake the flank of Faber's men. One of them was in plain view behind a protruding ledge. A quick shot tipped him backward and he lay still.

The man posted on the bench was now the chief worry of Lon's boys. Lon could see him stretched flat behind a cedar stump. It was a long shot for a six-gun, but Lon elevated his muzzle by guess and tried it. The bullet threw dirt over the forted man. Convinced he was making a target of himself, he scooted down the bench to a more sheltered spot.

Best promptly took advantage of the change of position. He crept up a little draw and gained the stump by the spring. Now it was Faber's men who were caught in a trap.

There wasn't a man in the Faber crowd who didn't realize his number was up if he and his comrades lost the battle. And if they didn't move, Lon and Best would pick them off one by one.

Lon heard Faber shouting but couldn't make out what the man was saying. He was not long in finding out. The entire Faber force rose and charged Lon's shelter. If Lon could be put out of the way and his forces flanked, Faber might yet win the battle.

Rifles cracked from the low ridge. Lon added his six-gun to the defense and Best joined in from the bench.

The reckless charge was too well advertised and exposed to succeed. The first to drop was Deacon Silver. Others fell. The only man to reach the boulder was Faber. Lon snapped his gun almost in Faber's face. There was only an empty click.

Triumph lighted Faber's agate eyes and spread over his predatory face. "I'll square things with you and then take your claims!" he boasted and fired.

Lon sidestepped and the bullet missed. Before Faber could fire again, Lon grappled with him. The two rolled down the slope battling in a life-and-death struggle.

It would have been a short fight, only Lon was weakened by wounds. Under the conditions, Faber was a match for him until Lon began to use his weight. With a mighty effort, Lon wrenched the gun from Faber's hand, only to have it knocked from his grip.

Weakened by dissipation and a soft life, Faber couldn't keep up a pace that called for endurance. Lon's big fingers closed on his throat. Long after Faber lay still, Lon hung on to make sure.

As the others came rushing up, Lon lunged to his feet. At that moment Best's rifle cracked up on the bench. A few minutes later he joined the others. He looked sober.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I put that last shot into Sagler," he explained. "I never did trust Nat, but I didn't think he'd sell us out. That's the way Faber got the bench. It was Nat who shot you, Lon. He was trying to run up the crick when I got him. It was a dead give-away. With that traitor in camp, I don't see how we beat Faber."

"We had a lot of luck," said Lon.

"It looks more like the workings of justice than of luck," said Best, eying the row of Faber men. "Well, now we'll have Nat's share to divide." He looked across the slope. "How about Jack and Texas?" he called.

"They'll do," shouted Jack's twin brother, Phil. "Bad hit, but like Lon they had the sense to lay doggo."

"Shucks," grinned Best, "I thought we was going to divide their shares, too." He turned to Lon. "You ain't never told us who we're diggin' that extra share for. Secret?"

"The share is for a dance-hall girl in Faber's Silver Toss," answered Lon. "I dunno what her name is, but if it hadn't been for her warning to me, not a hootin' one of us would be digging our independence out of this valley."

"In that case, she's sure entitled to a share," Best agreed.

"Yeah. And that includes a share in the inheritance from Nat Sagler and Jess Faber," said Lon.

THE END

CALIFORNIA'S EARLIEST RANCHES

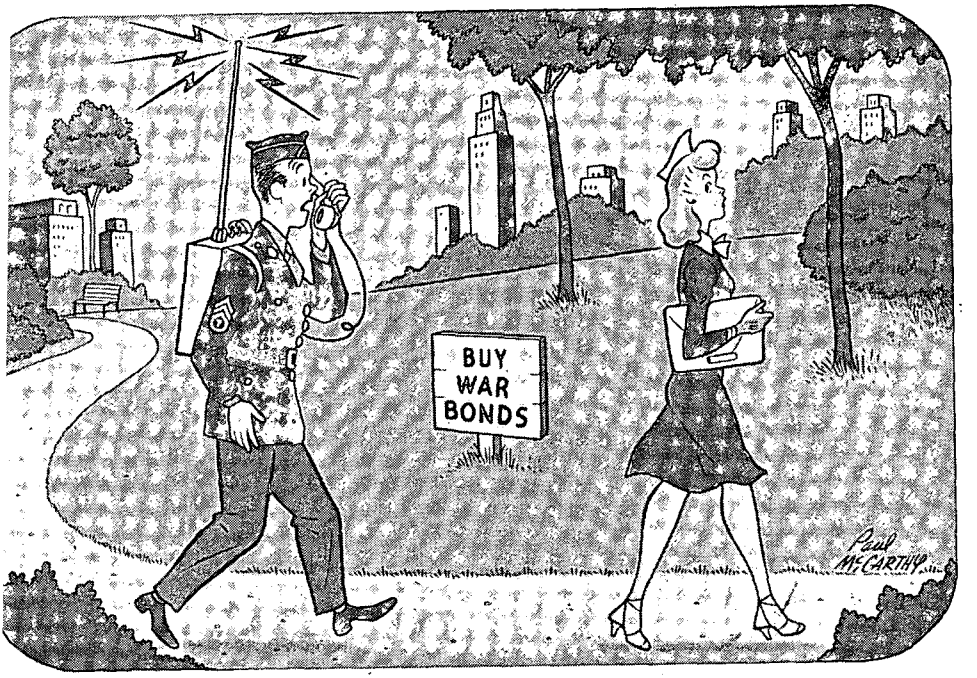
CALIFORNIA, in the lavish land-grant days of the Spanish and Mexican occupation, was probably the West's first great cattle country. The vast holdings of the Dons comprised what were virtually feudal states in the salubrious wilderness of the New World. Land grants were measured in thousands of acres. Tens of thousands of head of wild, unruly cattle roamed the ranch country.

Generally scrawny beasts, the cattle were raised, as were the first longhorns in Texas, primarily for their hides and tallow. Shiploads of these commodities were deposited by the rancheros in wharfside warehouses in the coast towns to be bartered for flour and other articles Yankee traders brought 'round the Horn in clipper ships. The Yankees frequently referred to the hides as "California bank notes."

According to old records, one big ranchero, Don José Domingo Peralta, was so enterprising he even had his own fleet of boats to transport his hides and tallow, California's chief export in those days. Another, Don Manuel Nieto, held some 70,000 acres of land including the present site of Long Beach and habitually ran 100,000 head of cattle. John Sutter, the Swiss adventurer on whose land Marshall discovered gold in 1848, owned a ranch of 100,000 acres on which he raised cattle, horses, mules, sheep, and hogs in vast numbers—and in addition produced some 40,000 bushels of wheat each year.—J. N.

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LIGHTER MOMENTS with fresh Eveready Batteries

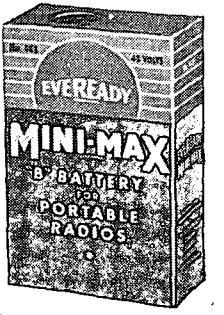


"So far it's been plenty walkie—but no talkie."

GOOD NEWS—"Eveready" "Mini-Max" batteries are back! Since Pearl Harbor, they have powered the famous walkie-talkies and other vital equipment for our Armed Forces.

Now, the War Production Board has authorized production of these famous "B" batteries for civilian radios. Chances are, you'll find them at your dealer's now.

Remember—size for size "Eveready" "Mini-Max" batteries are the most powerful "B" batteries ever made.

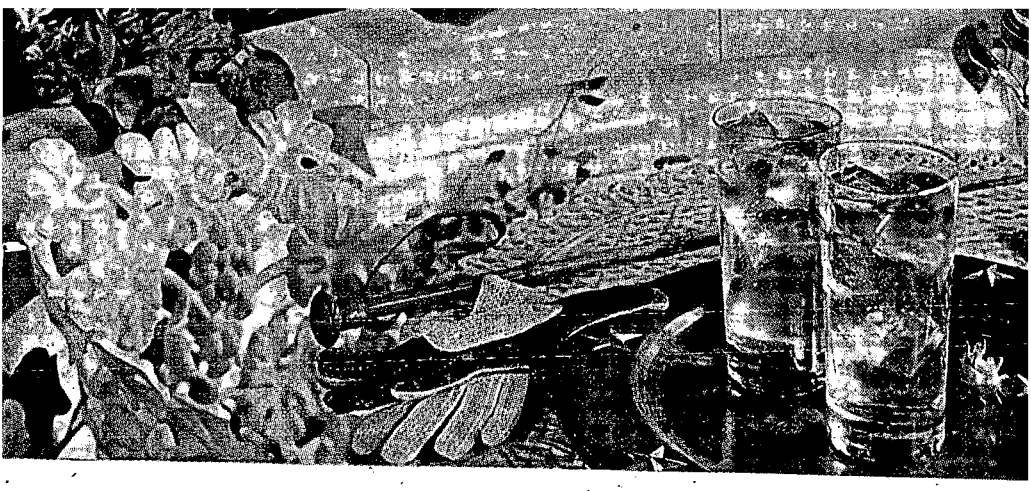


Looking ahead to Victory? "Keep your eye on the Infantry—the Doughboy Does It!"

The registered trade-marks "Eveready" and "Mini-Max" distinguish products of National Carbon Co., Inc.

EVEREADY
TRADE-MARK

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



"No wonder we cantered all the way home"

If you ever tasted a Calvert highball, you'll know why the gentleman was in a hurry! For Calvert is unmistakably *the real thing* in whiskey .... with a magnificent pre-war quality that simply can't be imitated.

You see, we've blended more fine whiskey in our time than any other distiller in America ... and no one has *yet* matched our superb blend! So just be sure you get Calvert... if you want *the real thing!*

CLEAR HEADS CHOOSE Calvert

It's the Real Thing

Calvert Distillers Corp., N.Y.C. BLENDED WHISKEY
86.8 Proof. "Reserve" 65% Grain Neutral Spirits..."Special" 72½% Grain Neutral Spirits

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED